

PRO Wrestling ILLUSTRATED

The Grades Are In!

presents

# Wrestling

REPORT CARDS OF THE STARS

COLLECTOR'S  
164  
PAGES!  
EDITION

The  
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e It!

Legend...

A Knockout...

A Legacy...

JULY 2008

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**O**N THE COVER of this magazine, you'll see three stars who are at the head of the class: Randy Orton, The Undertaker, and Gail Kim. Randy Orton was awarded the Raw World title at No Mercy (and lost the title to Triple-H before regaining it the very same night), and went on to vanquish contenders such as Shawn Michaels, Chris Jericho, and Jeff Hardy before John Cena returned to the scene in time for WrestleMania 24. The Undertaker outlasted U.S. champ Montel Vontavious Porter, Batista, Finlay, and Big Daddy V in an "Elimination Chamber" match at No Way Out to earn a shot at Smackdown World champion Edge at WrestleMania.

The results of WrestleMania 24 notwithstanding, it's no surprise that Orton and Undertaker earned "A"s in our 2008 "Report Cards Of The Stars."

Gail Kim didn't receive the same measure of glory, but she will always be remembered as a founding mother of TNA's fledgling women's division. It was her persistence and star-power that compelled TNA to establish a women's division in the first place. Besides, she could very well be the lady to finally stop current champion Awesome Kong. Hey, Gail, this "A" is for you.

In a sense, however, this edition of "Report Cards" is dedicated to a longtime veteran of the School of Hard Knocks, the legendary Ric Flair. His clash against Shawn Michaels at WrestleMania 24 will likely go down as the greatest match that has ever involved a 50-plus-year-old participant. We thought it was appropriate to evaluate Flair's career year-by-year—from 1973 to 2008—as the "Nature Boy's" incredible run draws to a close.

Indeed, the 16-time world champion's career is a study of wrestling history. The career-threatening plane crash of 1975, his violent feud with Wahoo McDaniel in 1977, his first NWA World title victory over Dusty Rhodes in 1981, his dominance of the NWA throughout the 1980s, his WCW World title wins in the 1990s, his WWF World title victory at the 1992 Royal Rumble, his involvement in the "Monday Night War," his return to the WWF in 2001, his 2005-'06 Intercontinental title reign, and his inspiring effort to keep his career alive in 2008 are all documented here.

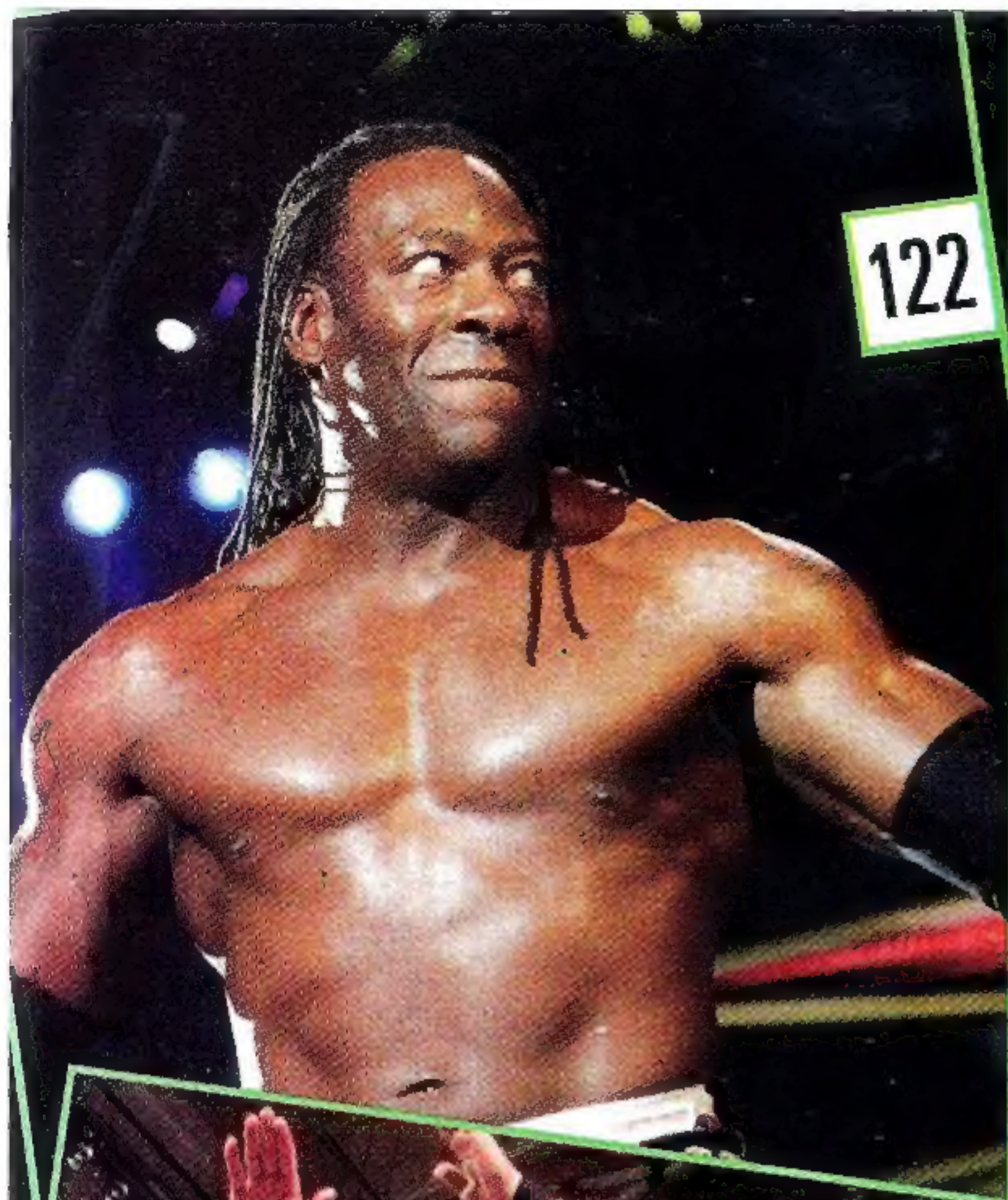
What an incredible career!

While looking over the grades of wrestling's top stars, I was struck by the number of underachievers. I'll be bold enough to name a few: Robert Roode (C), Ken Kennedy (C), Bryan Danielson (C-), and Carlito (D). Each of these young stars has the potential to be world champions. Now that Flair is preparing to put his wrestling career aside for a future in the financing sector, perhaps he can bequeath some of his greatest qualities upon these grapplers. He could give Roode the tips to work a 60-minute match, give Kennedy the courage to work beyond the script, give Danielson a dose of charisma, and give Carlito a burning desire to succeed.

To survive in this business, boys and girls, you've got to have a little bit of "Naitch" in you.

**Stu Saks**





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Craig Melvin/WWE/Courtesy of CW Network

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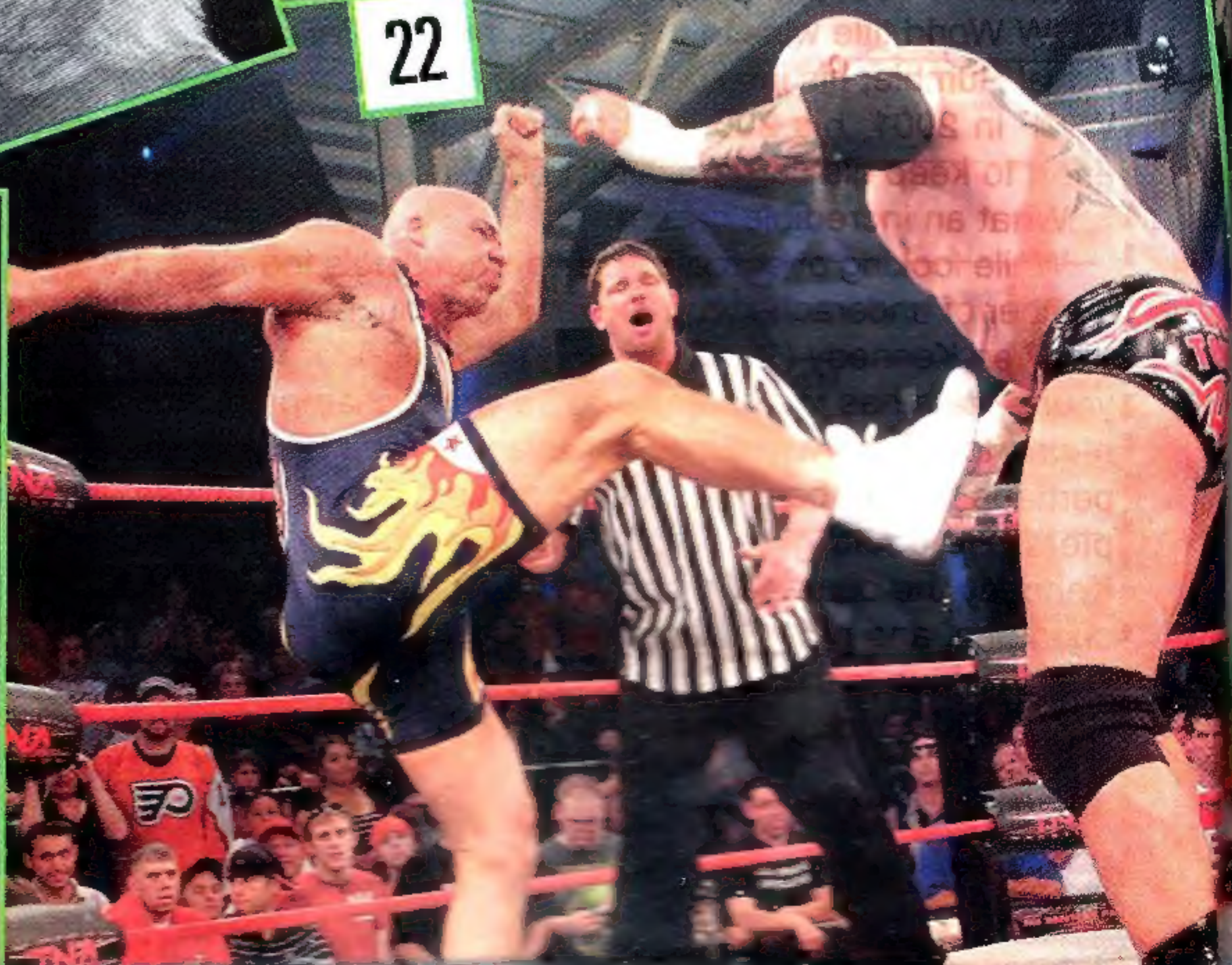
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# Wrestling

REPORT CARDS OF THE STARS

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July 2008



# REPORT CARDS *of the* STARS

**T**HE ANNUAL PWI "Report Cards" edition never fails to be one of our most controversial magazines of the year, and this year's assessments are bound to elicit a strong reaction from many of the wrestlers profiled, as well as fans, promoters, and industry insiders.

Each year, we select 50 of the top stars in the sport and attempt to objectively assess their achievement in five key categories: Goal Achievement, Marketability, Repertoire, Career Growth, and Overall Value. By awarding a letter grade in each of these categories, we are able to recognize and reward a wrestler's accomplishments in one category while identifying areas in need of improvement in another.

Goal Achievement refers to how well a wrestler has performed in relation to where he or she was last year at this time. For example, a wrestler who was recuperating from an injury a year ago may have had a goal of getting healthy and making it back to the ring, whereas a wrestler who enjoyed a banner year last year may have had an entirely different set of goals. Each wrestler's goals are unique, which means a mid-card competitor could theoretically score higher in Goal Achievement than a main-event talent.

Marketability refers to the wrestler's ability to capture the imagination of the fans. In short, can a promoter make money by having that wrestler on the card? We consider merchandise sales, TV ratings, and overall charisma as some of the factors in determining this grade.

Repertoire refers not only to the depth of a wrestler's move set, but also his or her judgment in knowing when to use the right move at the right time and not making tactical errors. Our editors view a lot of videotape to try to pick out specific bad habits certain wrestlers may use, and our attention to detail in this category has made plenty of wrestlers angry with us in the past.

Career Growth is closely tied to Goal Achievement, but, generally stated, it looks at more of the big picture. Instead of grading wrestlers based on the things they've achieved over the preceding 12 months, this category looks at the direction they are heading. Regardless of your career—be it wrestling, sales, or

what have you—if your career isn't growing, you're in a bad situation.

Finally, there's the Overall Value category. A wrestler's scores in each of the previous four categories factors into our final determination of that wrestler's overall value, but we also evaluate how valuable each wrestler is to their given promotion. A wrestler can score lousy grades in Repertoire and Career Growth but can still be a vital asset to a promotion, which will give that wrestler a good grade in Overall Value.

A few quick caveats before you rush to the following pages and see who made the dean's list and who should be making plans for summer school: Due to the deadline of this magazine, we were forced to make our evaluations just weeks before WrestleMania and Lockdown. In some cases, a strong performance—or a particularly poor performance—at one of those events might have caused us to change our thoughts, but we still feel confident that our grades accurately reflect each wrestler's achievements during the last year, even if they don't include the final exam.

Also, our "Report Cards" are slightly skewed since we limited our assessment to just 50 of the top stars in the sport. To be considered as one of the top 50 stars, these wrestlers must have performed well enough to make the cut, so we don't have any "F" students on our list. But we do have some very big names that fared surprisingly badly in some categories.

Our objective with these "Report Cards" is to offer honest evaluations and call things as we see them. We expect we'll make some wrestlers rather angry, but we suspect that most wrestlers are as aware of their weaknesses as they are their strengths, so none of this should come as a shock to anyone.

Okay, class dismissed ... it's "Report Card" time!

\*\*\*

Special thanks to Dan Murphy, who summarized the findings of the editors commissioned to make these analyses, to Tim Drake and Al Castle for helping to compile the Ric Flair section, and to all of our photographers, especially George Napolitano, George Tahinos, Lee South at TNA, and the entire WWE photo staff.



# Gail KIM

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** At Bound for Glory, Gail Kim became the first-ever TNA women's champion. She did more than just win a championship; she also took the helm of the Knockouts, which developed into the most exciting and vibrant division in the company at the end of 2007. Kim even headlined on the January 10 edition of *Impact* with her match against Awesome Kong. She ultimately lost that match, but the fact that she was able to headline a show ahead of stars like Kurt Angle, Samoa Joe, and Christian Cage speaks volumes for her standing in the company ... especially when you consider she was just working as a valet last year. **GRADE: A+**

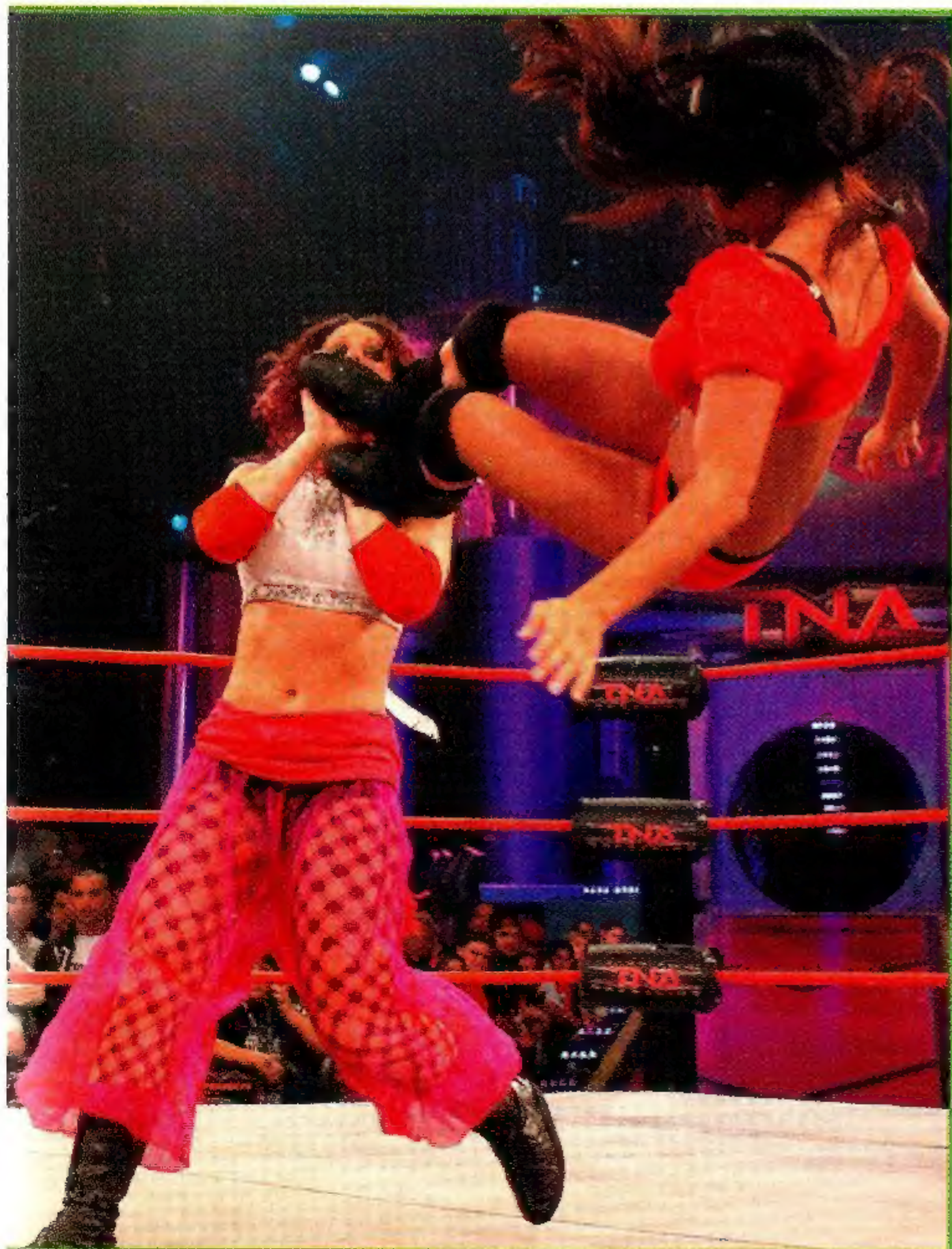


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

**MARKETABILITY:** *Forbes* magazine included Kim in its 2007 list of "America's Most Eligible Bachelorettes." She posed for a series of provocative cell phone ads in Korea, which made her an Internet sensation. She has been offered several film roles. All that and she's a hell of a wrestler, too. Few wrestlers—male or female—can touch her in terms of marketability. **GRADE: A+**

**REPERTOIRE:** Kim is one of the best pure athletes in the sport and she is constantly searching for new ways to maximize that athleticism with quick new moves that catch her opponents off-guard. Her style is a remarkable blend of traditional American pro wrestling and lucha libre. She has a variety of submission holds at her disposal and a tremendous missile dropkick. Even more impressive is her resilience; her ability to absorb punishment is unmatched in the Knockouts division. **GRADE: A+**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Just as Kim reached a new pinnacle of success, Awesome Kong was there to knock her back down to earth. Kim has responded the way a champion should—she came back with even more determination to regain the title. Kim's uneasy alliance with ODB puts a new obstacle in her path, however. And with the Knockouts attracting so much attention in recent months, it seems unlikely that anyone will be able to dominate the division long-term. Kim is fighting for her spot, and, with so much competition, her work is cut out for her. **GRADE: B+**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Kim is TNA's best all-around female wrestler. She can wrestle a variety of styles and adapt to just about any situation. In a lot of ways, she is to the Knockouts division what Jerry Lynn was to the X division in its infancy. She provides veteran leadership and serves as the cornerstone of the Knockouts. She can also be one of TNA's most vital stars as the company starts making new inroads internationally. For too long, Kim's beauty and talent had been buried. Now the company finally realizes that she can make TNA a ton of money. Gorgeous women who can wrestle five-star matches don't grow on trees. If they did, we'd plant a whole bunch of those trees! **GRADE: A**



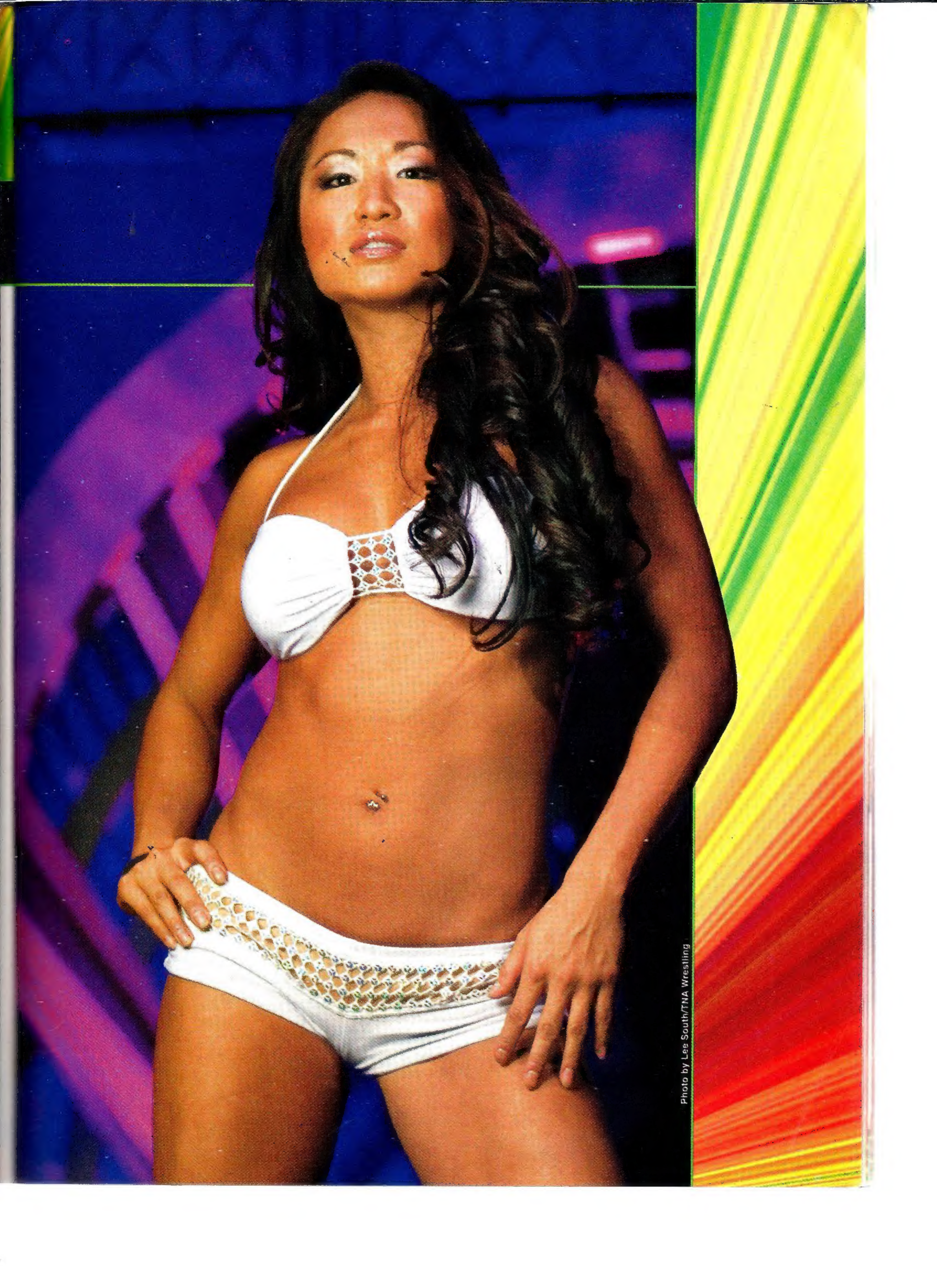
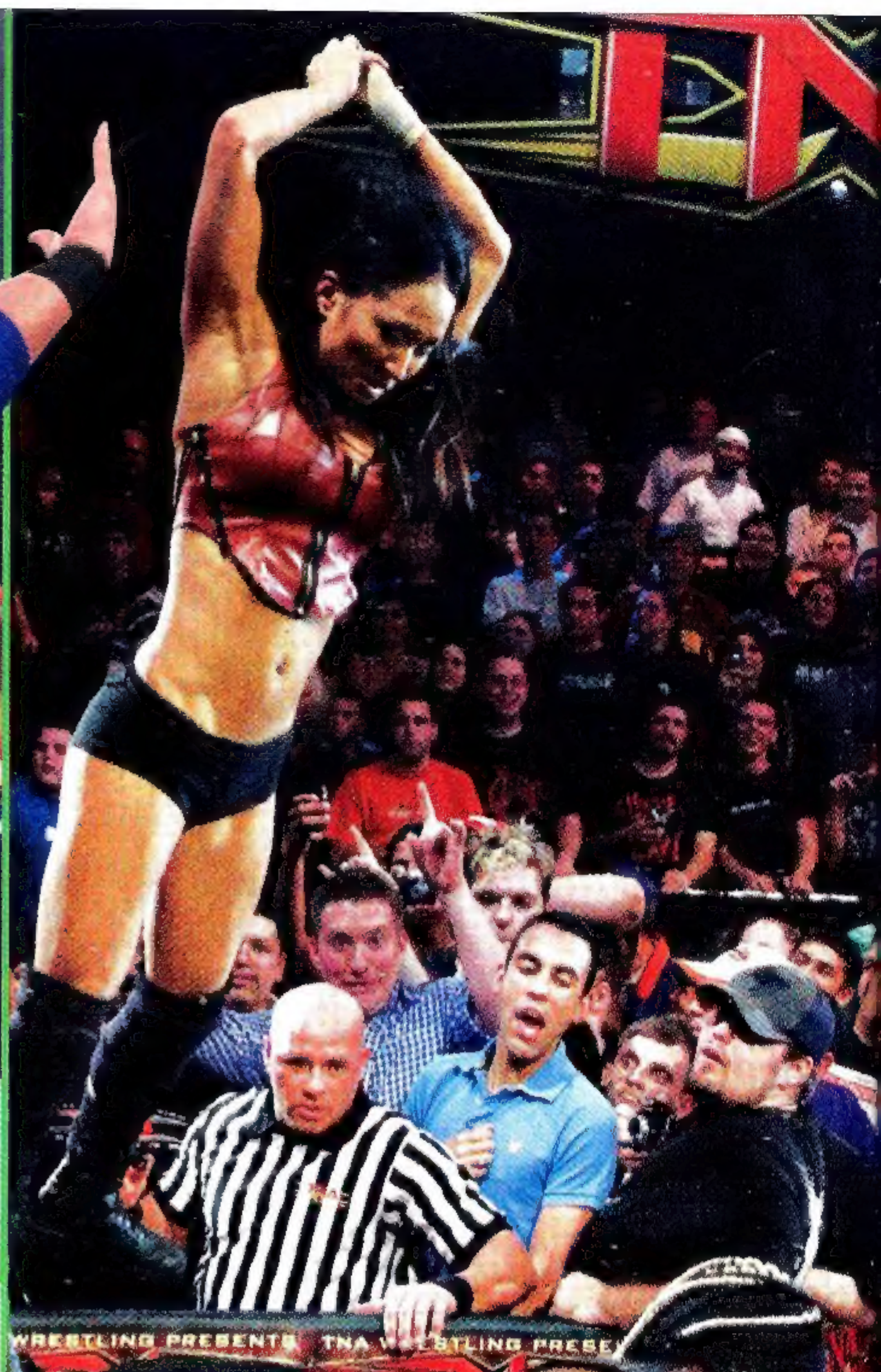


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling





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1

No woman has proven her mettle in TNA more so than Gail Kim. She has even matched up against the company's most challenging male competitors, including A.J. Styles.

2

There is one other TNA Knockout veteran eager to stand out in the title competition: Traci Brooks. But Brooks has herself so preoccupied with her personal problems, that Kim has been able to dominate Brooks in their matchups.

3

Even with new challenges, Kim is still the biggest threat to Awesome Kong's title. Kong might have the size and power advantage, but Kim can take control of her matches with her flexibility and aerial skill.

4

At TNA's Bound for Glory, Gail Kim earned the honored distinction of TNA's first women's champion. Although she lost the title in January to TNA's amazon, Awesome Kong, Kim managed to retain her title for 85 days and is still in the competition to regain it.

5

While Kim is glad to see a women's championship in TNA, she has had to take on a new horde of competitors, including ODB and Roxxi Laveaux. But Kim has waited a long time for her chance to shine in TNA, so she isn't going to let anyone overshadow her.

4

5





# Randy ORTON

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** The "Legend Killer" ought to find whoever decreed that championships couldn't change hands on disqualifications and put that person on his permanent Christmas card list. Randy Orton has relied on the DQ rule to keep his championship ever since No Mercy. That night, he was awarded the title due to Cena's injury and then immediately lost the belt to Triple-H. He managed to win the belt back before the night was over. Since then, he has intentionally gotten himself disqualified against Cena, Shawn Michaels, and Chris Jericho. While we don't condone intentional disqualifications, we have to give Orton credit for surviving challenges from some of the biggest stars in the sport and walking into 'Mania with the title around his waist. **GRADE: A+**

**MARKETABILITY:** Orton never took off as a fan favorite, which is fine because he's much more effective as a villain. Orton is the new breed of rulebreaker. He's an arro-

gant, obnoxious jerk, but he's also a skilled wrestler and a sadist. He's a lot like Christian Bale's character in *American Psycho*. He's a vile human being, but he still oozes charisma. In wrestling terms, that means the average fan is more than happy to plop down his or her hard-earned cash in hopes of seeing him get his comeuppance. That makes Orton marketable ... even if you have to scroll through loads of HHH, Cena, C.M. Punk, and Hardy gear to find his T-shirts and ringtones on the WWE Shop website. **GRADE: B+**

**REPERTOIRE:** There has been a lot of hype about Orton being a third-generation wrestler; but that fact means more than that he's simply in the family business. From a very early age, Orton was taught the finer points of the wrestling game. He learned takedowns and counters, and, when he was a bit older, he learned ring generalship and a decent dose of dirty tricks. He has been training for his time to shine since he was an infant. He doesn't get a lot of credit for being a technical marvel, but that's because he bases most of his offensive on hitting an explosive finish with the RKO. Just like his father, "Cowboy" Bob Orton, Randy keeps his cards close to the vest. When pressed, he always seems able to find an appropriate high-impact move (a DDT or neckbreaker) to regain the advantage. **GRADE: A**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Everyone talks about the backlash Cena has faced, but people forget Orton faced a similar reaction back in 2004 when he won his first world title. Orton began hearing some boos during his feud with his former mentor, Triple-H. When he lost the belt to HHH, Orton struggled through an ill-advised feud with The Undertaker and teamed with Edge to feud with DX. He has finally gotten back on track, but his post-'Mania prognosis is cloudy at best. **GRADE: A**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Orton is a mix of the dastardliest traits of Roddy Piper, Ric Flair, and Jake Roberts. He's evil to the core and as dangerous as they come. Every company needs a strong bad guy, and Orton is the strongest bad guy in WWE. **GRADE: A**



Photo by George Napolitano





Photo by George Napolitano









1

Fair play is not Orton's strong suit. The third generation superstar learned at a young age that it doesn't matter how you keep your belt; the most important thing is how long you keep it. And Orton has maintained his title reign by any means necessary against all comers.

2

Nobody was more surprised—or concerned—than Orton when John Cena returned early from a torn pectoral muscle. But try as he might, Cena has been unable to wrest the WWE title from the "Legend Killer" as of press time.

3

Randy Orton and Edge teamed briefly to form "Rated RKO." Adding the ultraviolet Umaga to the team made it the most explosively dangerous group to perform at Raw's 15th Anniversary show.

4

Few people were happy when Vince McMahon handed John Cena's vacated title to Randy Orton at No Mercy. But the "Legend Killer" silenced his critics by defeating Triple-H to regain the belt later that same night.

5

Because Orton relies so heavily on the RKO to end matches, many critics consider him a "one-trick pony." But challenger Jeff Hardy experienced Orton's depth first hand after his attempted twist of fate was reversed into an RKO.

# Randy ORTON

4

5





# UNDERTAKER

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** If there's anyone that really should write a book about his wrestling career, it would be the "Dead Man." After all, The Undertaker has managed to take a more or less one-dimensional persona and stay relevant for 20 years, including the biggest boom period in wrestling history. The two most important things he has done was taking frequent sabbaticals to keep his body rested and prevent himself from getting stale, while gradually introducing new MMA-inspired moves into his arsenal. Unlike most wrestlers who hit a peak and gradually become less effective, Undertaker grows more dangerous with each passing year. He won the Smackdown World title at WM 23 and got another title shot for WM 24. He is poised to rule the Smackdown brand through 2008. What more can you ask for? **GRADE: A**

**MARKETABILITY:** Another area where The Undertaker excels. 'Taker does it all—he draws ratings, he puts butts in the seats, he sells huge amounts of merchan-

dise. Jim Ross doesn't call him "The Phenom" for nothing. **GRADE: A+**

**REPERTOIRE:** His variation of the gogoplata choke has been tremendously effective. In some ways, it's a natural progression from the triangle choke and dragon sleeper he had adopted in past years. His lateral movement and strikes have improved as well. Instead of being a walking dead man, 'Taker uses quick head feints, jabs, and blocks like a boxer, while protecting his lower body from kicks and takedowns. Unlike years ago, he rarely gets outwrestled, even against the most technically skilled opponents. Had he been born 10 or 15 years later, he probably would have gone straight to the mixed martial arts world. **GRADE: A**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Some might say The Undertaker takes a back seat to the top stars simply because he's part of the Smackdown roster. We adamantly disagree. The Undertaker is the anchor of the Smackdown brand in a way that no one—not even Triple-H—has been able to be for the Raw brand. 'Taker could debut on Raw tomorrow and instantly be one of the top names on the brand. He's still contending for world titles, he's still wrestling in main events, and he's still entertaining fans. Arguably, he's as good as he's ever been. **GRADE: A+**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Add it all up ... The Undertaker is a straight-A wrestler. In fact, there are very few new challenges left for him. He has done a masterful job at cultivating his mystique, keeping himself in peak physical condition, and adding new moves to his move set. When wrestling historians look back on the post-Hulkamania WWE era, The Undertaker will probably be the man they credit as holding the company together more than all the Austins, Rocks, HHHs, and Cenas combined. **GRADE: A**



Rich Freeda/WWE/Courtesy of CW Network





Mike Marques/WWE/Courtesy of CW Network





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3





# THE UNDERTAKER

1

Eighteen years on the WWE roster and The Undertaker is still one of the company's top names. He consistently delivers standout performances, no matter if his opponent is The Miz on a regular Smackdown taping (pictured), or Batista in a PPV main event.

Photo by Craig Melvin/WWE/Courtesy of CW Network

2

Mark Calaway celebrated his 44th birthday in March. Most men in his position would begin to consider career options at that point, but 'Taker is as hungry as ever. Just ask Batista, who was tasting metal after being hit with the ring steps at Survivor Series.

3

At the Raw 15th Anniversary show, Vince McMahon proclaimed himself the greatest star in Raw history. "The Phenom" understandably took great offense, considering all the money he has made for WWE during his tenure.

4

At nearly 32 minutes each, The Undertaker and Shawn Michaels lasted longer than anyone else at the 2008 Royal Rumble. That's a tribute not only to both men's conditioning, but their love for the sport and their desire to succeed after all these years.

5

'Taker wisely takes frequent sabbaticals to both rest his body and study his craft. While he has incorporated MMA moves into his arsenal, the "Dead Man" will still use a tried-and-true tombstone piledriver when the opportunity presents itself.

5



▲ JULY 2008 ▲ 27

4





# Kurt

# ANGLE

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Kurt Angle has had an unprecedented year that saw him collect the TNA World, X division, and tag team titles, as well as the IWGP 3rd Belt championship. Angle has turned back the challenge of every contender in TNA, though the most physical match of his TNA tenure looms (as of this writing) in his Lockdown bout against Samoa Joe. Angle may have had the single greatest year of any wrestler, but he did have his share of embarrassments, such as his loss to Jay Lethal, his Bound for Glory loss to Sting, and ongoing strife with his wife, Karen. It wasn't a perfect year ... but it was close. **GRADE: A-**

**MARKETABILITY:** The Kurt Angle story reads like a made-for-TV drama. He overcame a broken neck to win Olympic gold. He defied the odds and became the most lauded wrestler of his time. He recovered from injury, fatigue, and departure from WWE to rebuild his career in TNA. Forget Cael Sanderson and Rulon Gardner; Kurt Angle should have his face on a Wheaties box. Angle is an elite superstar and is among

the top five wrestlers in the world in terms of name recognition. Factor in the Olympic medals and you have a marketing dynamo. Still, Angle really needs to learn to stop saying absurd things in his interviews. When he takes pot shots at WWE stars and prattles on and on about going into mixed martial arts (at 39 years old and with a surgically repaired neck, that's practically suicide), he just ruins his credibility. **GRADE: B+**

**REPERTOIRE:** No one in wrestling is better at take-downs, go-behinds, and quick counters. But for all Angle's grappling accomplishments, he's still a sucker for a keylock or a rear naked choke—another reason why he'd never survive in MMA. Just ask Samoa Joe ... or Daniel Puder. **GRADE: A-**

**CAREER GROWTH:** It would have been easy for Angle to settle down in TNA. The company has a much more relaxed touring schedule than what he was accustomed to in WWE. He could have chosen to cash some easy paychecks and wrestle a few times a month, just like Sting. Instead, Angle took on new urgency. Not only does he wrestle at almost every *Impact* taping, but he has defended the title on almost every house show as well. He's also accepted bookings in Japan and had tremendous success overseas. While we think it would be a foolish decision for Angle to delve into the MMA world, it shows that his competitive spirit is still strong. Instead of growing complacent, he's always looking for the next mountain to scale. **GRADE: A**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Angle has a way of letting his greatness get partially eclipsed by outside factors. Recently, the soap opera drama between him and Karen has garnered more attention than his success in the ring. When you look past the drama, one unmistakable fact is clear: Angle is the best wrestler in the world today. TNA is very lucky to have him. **GRADE: A-**



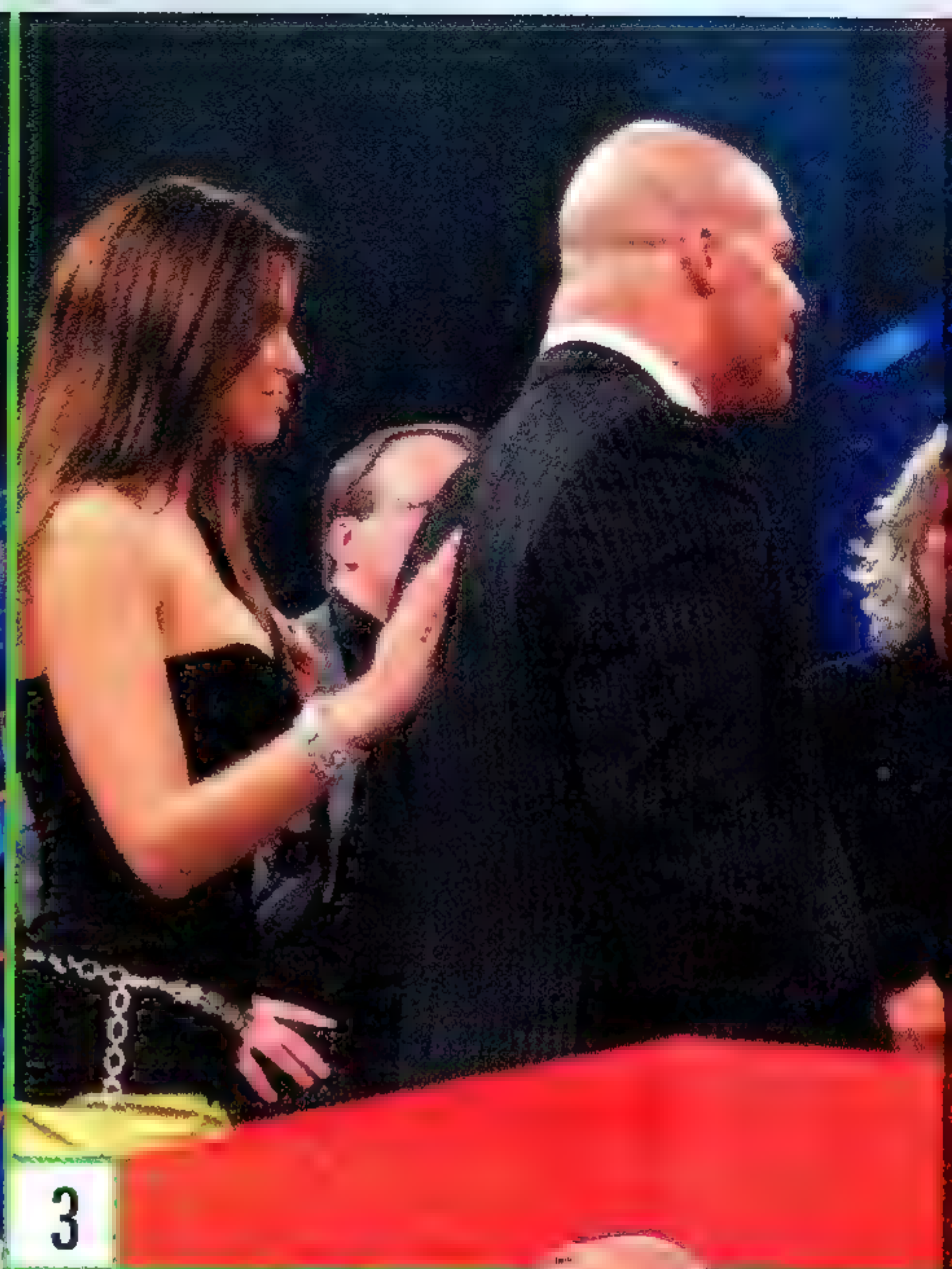
Photo by George Tan nos





Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling





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Kurt

# AMG



1

Few wrestlers possess Angle's technical acumen or fanatical intensity. Both traits enable Angle to compete with, and at times dominate, bigger, stronger men, such as Travis Tomko. Angle had a career year in 2007.

2

At *Against All Odds* in February, Angle defended his title against Christian Cage. While Angle took the glory for himself, his win was due to the interference of cronies Tomko and A.J. Styles.

3

Angle and Samoa Joe are no strangers. The two have fought with and against each other over the years. Their on-again, off-again partnership culminated at *Lockdown 2008* at which Angle put his World title up for grabs, while Joe put his job on the line.

4

The Angles' marital strife has been the centerpiece of TNA programming since Karen's debut in the summer of 2007. While it might be nice for Kurt to have the attention of the TNA audience, it would be nicer if it were for his many ring accomplishments.

5

Sting was long considered the face of TNA, but Angle challenged that notion after coming in from WWE in late-2006. Here, it looks as if Angle's famous intensity is too much for "The Stinger" to take.

5





C.M.

# PUNK

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** With or without the title belt, C.M. Punk is the franchise player of the ECW brand. Unfortunately, that doesn't necessarily translate into success on the Smackdown or Raw brands, where Punk is widely viewed as a mid-card performer and not a former heavyweight champion. We understand Punk wants to get revenge on Chavo Guerrero and regain the ECW title, but at this stage of his career, that would be a big step backward. He's been there and done that. It's time for him to set his sights on some more ambitious goals. **GRADE: B**

**MARKETABILITY:** With all the controversy that has swirled around WWE regarding steroids and other drugs, Punk is the perfect ambassador for the company. Because of his straight-edge lifestyle, Punk steers clear of all drugs and alcohol and that makes him an ideal role model in a sport that has seen far too many heroes fall from grace. Punk is also articu-

late and charismatic and he conducts himself with poise and grace. On top of all that, he has a dedicated core fan following, including the diehards who have supported him since his earliest days in Ring of Honor. There aren't many wrestlers who can touch Punk in fan appeal. **GRADE: A+**

**REPERTOIRE:** It's a shame ECW on Sci Fi is only one hour long, because Punk doesn't get much time to shine. One of Punk's greatest assets is his superior cardiovascular conditioning. Get to an arena three hours before a show and you're likely to see Punk running stairs as a warm-up. While others tire as the match gets longer, Punk gets stronger. Punk is always scouring Japanese puroresu tapes for ideas, which is how he developed his go-to-sleep finisher and his former finisher, the anaconda vise. He's a dedicated student of the game, and he's constantly looking to add to his skill set. The depth of his repertoire will become more apparent when he gets more than six or seven minutes of TV time to showcase his skills. **GRADE: A+**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Losing the ECW title to Chavo Guerrero was definitely a setback, especially since Chavo has been a career underachiever and Punk is on the short list to WWE superstardom. Punk got knocked down a peg. Now it's up to him to show that he can recover. The working agreement between ECW and Smackdown gave him a huge opportunity to gain more exposure and face a greater variety of opponents. He needs to do whatever he can to spend more time on Smackdown and less time in ECW. **GRADE: B+**

**OVERALL VALUE:** There are two obstacles standing between Punk and WWE greatness. First, he isn't afraid to speak his mind and damn the consequences. That kind of attitude is bound to draw enemies. Second, he doesn't have the jacked-up physique that most casual fans expect from a WWE main-eventer. It might take him a while to win over the fans who judge the book based on the cover, but, if he can avoid political pitfalls, Punk can be WWE's breakout sensation of 2009. **GRADE: A-**



Photo by George Napolitano





Photo by George Napolitano



C.M.

# PUNK

1

Punk's matches against Morrison, Chavo Guerrero and James Curtis (pictured) may be entertaining, but he needs to set his sights higher than ECW in 2009. There's no reason Punk shouldn't shine on Raw or Smackdown this year.

2

Sharp suplexes are just one of the many maneuvers in Punk's repertoire. In the ring, Punk has all the tools to succeed in WWE. Out of the ring, his adherence to clean living makes him a perfect ambassador for professional wrestling.

3

The only area where Punk lacks the goods may be his physique. Although he has great cardiovascular stamina, Punk doesn't possess the same sculpted body as Johnny Morrison. So far, Punk hasn't let that hold him back.

1

2

3





# TRIPLE-H

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Triple-H had the entire scenario scripted out. He would win the Royal Rumble to earn a WrestleMania title shot against Randy Orton. Then, after a light tuneup match at No Way Out, he would head off to Orlando, where he would down Orton and collect his 12th world title. Unfortunately for HHH, John Cena came back from his injury far earlier than expected and put his plans in jeopardy. Cena's return notwithstanding, Triple-H has returned to form from that torn quadriceps injury he suffered in early-2007. He even had a one-night stand as champion (well, part of one night, anyway) at No Mercy. Overall, he's done very well, but he's vying with Cena and Orton as the top star on the Raw brand instead of having that unofficial title all to himself. **GRADE: A-**

**MARKETABILITY:** Barring a full-fledged heel turn, Triple-H may be more marketable right now than at

any other point in his career. The DX reunion is still fresh in the fans' minds, and HHH is abiding by the rules, which is a rarity for him. He seems to be enjoying hearing the fans' cheers, too. Even those who dislike him have to admit that Triple-H is the standard of excellence in WWE today. **GRADE: A+**

**REPERTOIRE:** Unlike 2002, when he returned from his previous quadriceps tear, Triple-H looks leaner and fitter than he did before the injury. It's obvious he has worked hard to get himself in perfect shape. He has power, he has technical skills, and he has as much passion as anyone. **GRADE: A**

**CAREER GROWTH:** A lot of people speculate that Triple-H wants to surpass Ric Flair's 16 world championships so he can make a case for himself being the greatest wrestler of all-time. Well, it's going to take a lot more than a few more titles for HHH to be able to stake that claim. Barring serious injuries, Triple-H will probably be competing in WWE for another decade, and it seems almost impossible to believe he won't be collecting his fair share of titles until he decided it's all over for "The Game." We think Triple-H's true motivation isn't so much the quantity of titles he collects as it is about his lasting legacy. When people think of HHH 20 years from now, will he be considered the consummate ring general who carried on Flair's legacy? Or, will he be remembered as the guy who married into the McMahon family and played politics to his own advantage? If he retired today, our hunch is the latter is the reputation he would have. He needs to do more—have more Matches of the Year, help build more new stars—in short, give more back to the sport. That matters way more than how many titles he wins. **GRADE: B**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Triple-H is still the man to beat on Raw. A win over HHH can launch a career. Yet he'll always be resented for "hogging the spotlight" and inserting himself into the main event when the fans would prefer to see others in his place. Why is it that things always seem more exciting when HHH is out of action? **GRADE: A-**



Photo by George Napolitano





Photo by George Napolitano



# TRIPLE H

1

The pedigree is still HHH's pet finisher, but a slimmer "Game" is discovering all the great things his new physique can do. Most importantly, his new training approach may help him prevent further injuries.

2

Although his reign lasted a little less than two hours, Triple-H won his 11th world title at No Mercy from newly appointed Raw World champion Randy Orton. That short taste of gold was enough to reignite the "King Of Kings" interest in the title race.

3

He still reunites with old friend and partner Shawn Michaels occasionally for DX cameos. Triple-H knows what the fans want, and he is more than willing to give it to them, which is why he is so marketable for the company ... and begging for DX purchases on nearly every episode of Raw doesn't hurt either.



1

2



3





# Awesome KONG

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Awesome Kong came out of nowhere and instantly changed the complexion of not just TNA's Knockouts division, but of women's wrestling throughout the United States. A graduate of All Japan's infamous training dojo, Kong has pioneered a crushing power style in TNA's women's division. Her impact has been compared to that of Big Van Vader when he stormed into WCW in the early-1990s and laid waste to everything in his path. Kong has had a stranglehold on the women's title since January 10 and has quickly established herself among the most dominant women wrestlers ever. **GRADE: A**

**MARKETABILITY:** Kong's take-no-prisoners stiff style has won her plenty of respect. In a lot of ways, she's similar to Samoa Joe, who is the most popular competitor in TNA. But, as the saying goes, sex sells, and Kong is the least sexy Knockout in TNA. Her face isn't going to sell a lot of magazines, and you're not going

to have to worry about running out of 8x10 glossies at the souvenir stand. However, she *is* a wrestler fans will pay to see, and, as her January 10 title win over Gail Kim showed, she is capable of delivering a main event-worthy bout. **GRADE: B**

**REPERTOIRE:** Frankly, we think Kong's repertoire has been overrated. True, she trained in a commanding dojo and has already been exposed to a variety of international fighting styles, so she's more well-rounded than most other women wrestlers in the U.S. But other than her frequently telegraphed spinning backfist, Kong relies almost exclusively on her power bomb, facebuster, and chokeslam, with an occasional accordion rack thrown in for good measure. We're not trying to diminish any of those moves, but we need to see more before we fully buy in to all the hype. **GRADE: C+**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Kong was virtually unknown in the U.S. prior to her debut in TNA last October. In a very short period of time she rocketed to the top of the Knockouts division and established herself as *the* woman to beat. Whether she or Beth Phoenix is the most dangerous female wrestler in the sport today is a subject of true debate. To go from virtual obscurity to being considered as the top woman in the sport in less than six months is remarkable. **GRADE: A+**

**OVERALL VALUE:** TNA has done such a good job of building up its women's division that there have been rumors the company is looking to give the women their own separate show. Kong is a major reason for that resurgence. She has effectively steamrolled lesser ladies such as Christy Hemme, Angelina Love, and Traci Brooks and has forced Gail Kim and ODB to ratchet up their game to new levels just to be able to compete. Kong prevents the Knockouts division from becoming consumed by eye candy and gives the division more credibility. The only real question is whether she can demonstrate staying power should her aura of invincibility be tarnished. Remember how far Vader fell when Hulk Hogan leapt back to his feet after taking a power bomb? **GRADE: B+**



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling





Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



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# Awesome Kong



3

1

Authority is of no concern to Kong. Referees have tried to tame the beast, but, as this official discovered, she is just as willing to Awesome bomb a ref as she is to Awesome bomb any of the Knockouts.

2

Delicate Knockouts like Angelina Love have little chance against the behemoth Awesome Kong. With the size advantage she has over the majority of the women's division, it is no wonder Kong has held onto the title since winning it in January.

3

If it weren't for Gail Kim's ability to absorb punishment, she would have been out of Awesome Kong's hair long ago. But fortunately for Kong, the TNA women's champ has been able to stop every obstacle thrown her way ... even a Weeble-like Gail Kim.

4

Kong's size and power give her both an offensive and defensive advantage over her opponents. Once Kong clamps on this hold, Kim is unlikely to power out or mount a counter attack.



2

4





# John

# CENA

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** The most polarizing figure in WWE history had just reached his one-year anniversary as Raw World champion when he ripped his pectoral muscle executing a routine hiptoss in an October defense against Ken Kennedy. The injury did what no other wrestler had been able to do—it forced Cena to relinquish the championship. The prognosis was that Cena would require seven to 12 months to recuperate from the injury, but Cena shocked the world by returning at the Royal Rumble a mere three months later. Cena deserves high marks for returning so quickly, but we can't help but be concerned that his haste to return in time for WrestleMania may leave him susceptible for further injury. He leveraged the shock of his return to win his first Royal Rumble, but he failed to regain the title at No Way Out and has an uphill climb if he hopes to beat out Randy Orton and HHH through the spring. **GRADE: B+**

**MARKETABILITY:** How is it that a wrestler booed by approximately 30 percent of the fans is still far and away the most popular wrestler in the sport today?

"The Champ" is held in such high regard by so many fans that he sells more merchandise than anyone else on the WWE roster ... or anywhere else, for that matter. It's like Hulk Hogan, circa 1987. **GRADE: A+**

**REPERTOIRE:** It's been said before, but it bears repeating: Cena is a limited technician whose flashiness dresses up the most rudimentary of moves. His FU finisher is little more than a run-of-the-mill bodyslam ... and don't even get us started on the five-knuckle shuffle. But, nevertheless, his moves seem to get the job done. **GRADE: B-**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Cena's pectoral injury represents a major crossroads in his career. While Cena was beating back all contenders, Triple-H was content to go about his business with his DX hijinks. The moment Cena showed vulnerability, "The Game" turned his attention back to the title. Cena had established himself as the rightful champion, but once he vacated the title, the floodgates opened up. Cena is going to have to prove he can defeat Orton, HHH,

Chris Jericho, and Jeff Hardy if he wants to regain the same position he occupied before the injury. **GRADE: B**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Cena has done a tremendous job in standing up to the critics and conducting himself with class and style. The injury knocked him down a few pegs, so he's going to have to prove himself all over again. For some reason, we think he's going to have more trouble beating HHH this time around than he did in 2006. **GRADE: B+**



Photo by George Napolitano

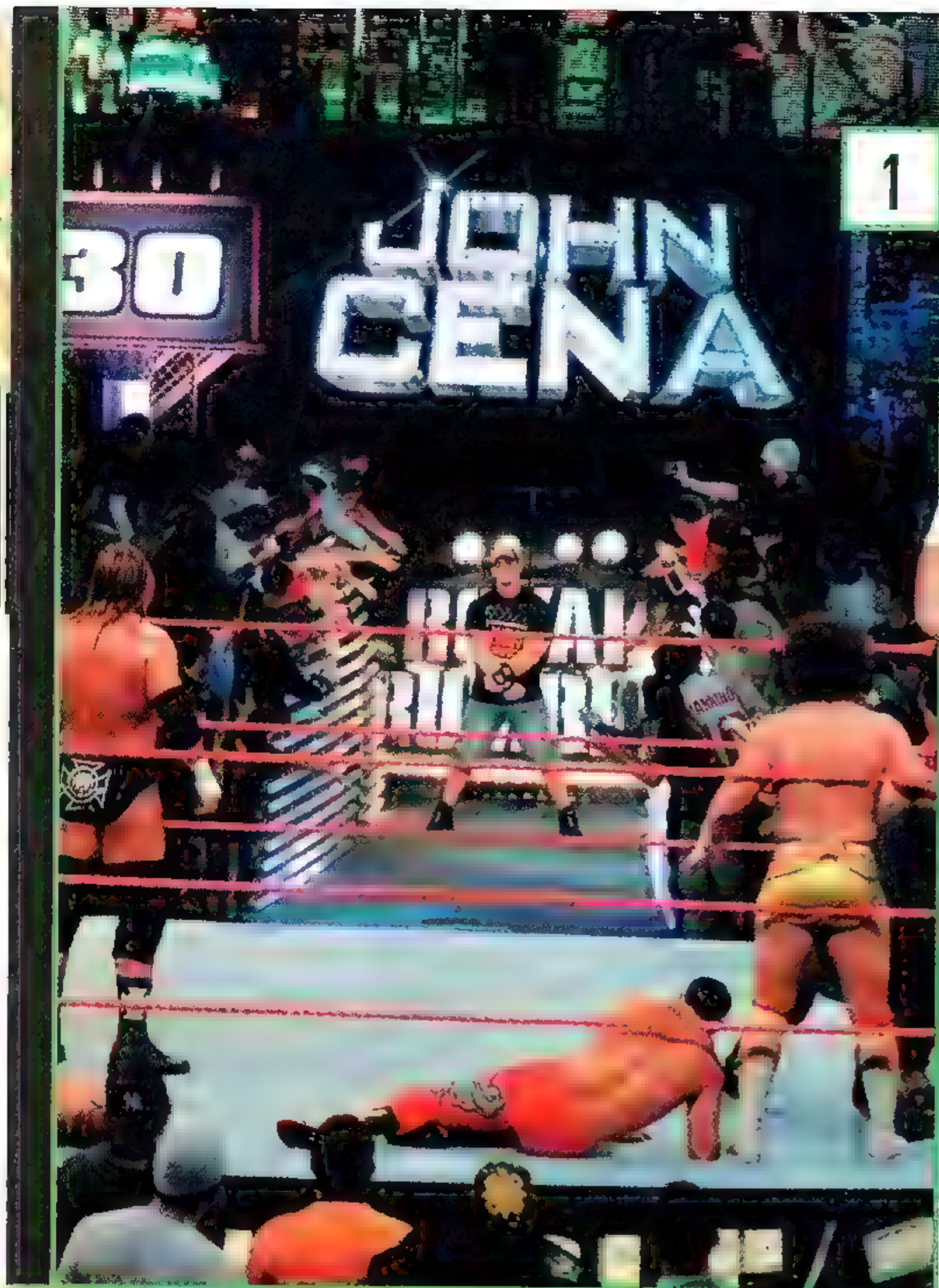




Photo by George Napolitano

EARLESS





1



3

2





John

# CENA



1

While his speedy recovery was impressive, it may have been foolish. Cena is going to have to fight harder to regain his title, and his chest may not be ready to handle that kind of punishment.

2

If Cena were to increase his repertoire of moves, he would not only increase his chances of reclaiming the Raw title, but win over his remaining skeptics. Relying so heavily on moves like the STFU only gives his opponents more chances to learn to escape it.

3

Cena knows how to make even the simplest maneuvers look spectacular. Still, those same moves seem to effectively disarm his opponents, rendering tacticians like Carlito ineffective.

4

Prior to his injury, Triple-H had seemingly given up on challenging Cena for the Raw World title. But as soon as Cena was out of the game, "The Game" stepped up his. The competition at the top of the Raw brand will be riveting for months to come.

5

Prior to his injury, Cena was handling one challenger at a time. But since his return, the entire roster seems to be on guard ... particularly current titleholder Randy Orton. Cena has more enemies now than he's ever had.

4



5



# EDGE

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** There are certain people who come upon a boulder blocking the road and complain that their way has been blocked. There are other people who will try to find ways to move that boulder and proceed down the road. And then there are people like Edge, people who will find the path the rolling boulder created and follow it to an entirely new road and a new destination. In May 2007, the "Rated R Superstar" beat Ken Kennedy to win Kennedy's "Money In The Bank" title shot, which he cashed in days later and used to beat The Undertaker to win the Smackdown World title. Unfortunately for Edge, the "Smackdown Curse" doesn't distinguish between rulebreakers and fan favorites and, two months after winning the title, he was sidelined with a torn pectoral muscle. Edge returned and recruited new allies in Vickie Guerrero, Curt Hawkins, and Zack Ryder, and regained the World title at Armageddon. He's as sleazy as they come, but you can't argue with success. **GRADE: B+**



Photo by George M. Napolitano

**MARKETABILITY:** The Smackdown brand is a nice fit for Edge. Like his former partner, Christian Cage, he spent several years building his reputation as a tag team specialist. Because of that, and the fact that he has had to rely on outside interference and political maneuvering to win each of his four world titles, Edge is often seen as an undeserving champion. The truth is that Edge is wrestling's ultimate opportunist. He'll try to gain any advantage he can, but he's also capable of beating anyone on any given night. He has the coolest nickname in wrestling, has a passionate base of Edgeheads, and sells T-shirts aplenty. And on the Smackdown brand, he can continue to grow and develop without having to compete against the Cenases, Michaels, HHHs, and Ortons of the red brand. **GRADE: A-**

**REPERTOIRE:** The spear may not look like a particularly complex move, but Edge has a unique way of delivering his coup de grâce. Instead of driving his left shoulder into an opponent's gut (à la Rhino), Edge slams full-force into an opponent's chest. The impact is enough to knock the wind out of an opponent and possibly collapse a lung or cause heart palpitations. It's a dangerous move that doesn't leave Edge in a high-risk position when executing it. Add in the downward spiral, the Edgecution DDT, and his old Edgecator sharpshooter variation, and you have a wrestler who knows a lot of effective ways to hurt a person. **GRADE: B+**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Edge was forced to take a step backward after losing his feud against Cena. Instead of getting mired in a go-nowhere feud or settling on a secondary title, he won the World title on WWE's secondary brand. As of this writing, he's a champion, while Cena is just another contender. **GRADE: B+**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Triple-H, Shawn Michaels, and Undertaker may be the biggest names in WWE, but it's guys like Edge, Randy Orton, and Ken Kennedy who seem to be the future of the sport. Edge lost some luster after losing several matches to Cena, but he recovered nicely. We are confident Edge will be one of the most controversial—and successful—wrestlers for the rest of the year. **GRADE: B+**



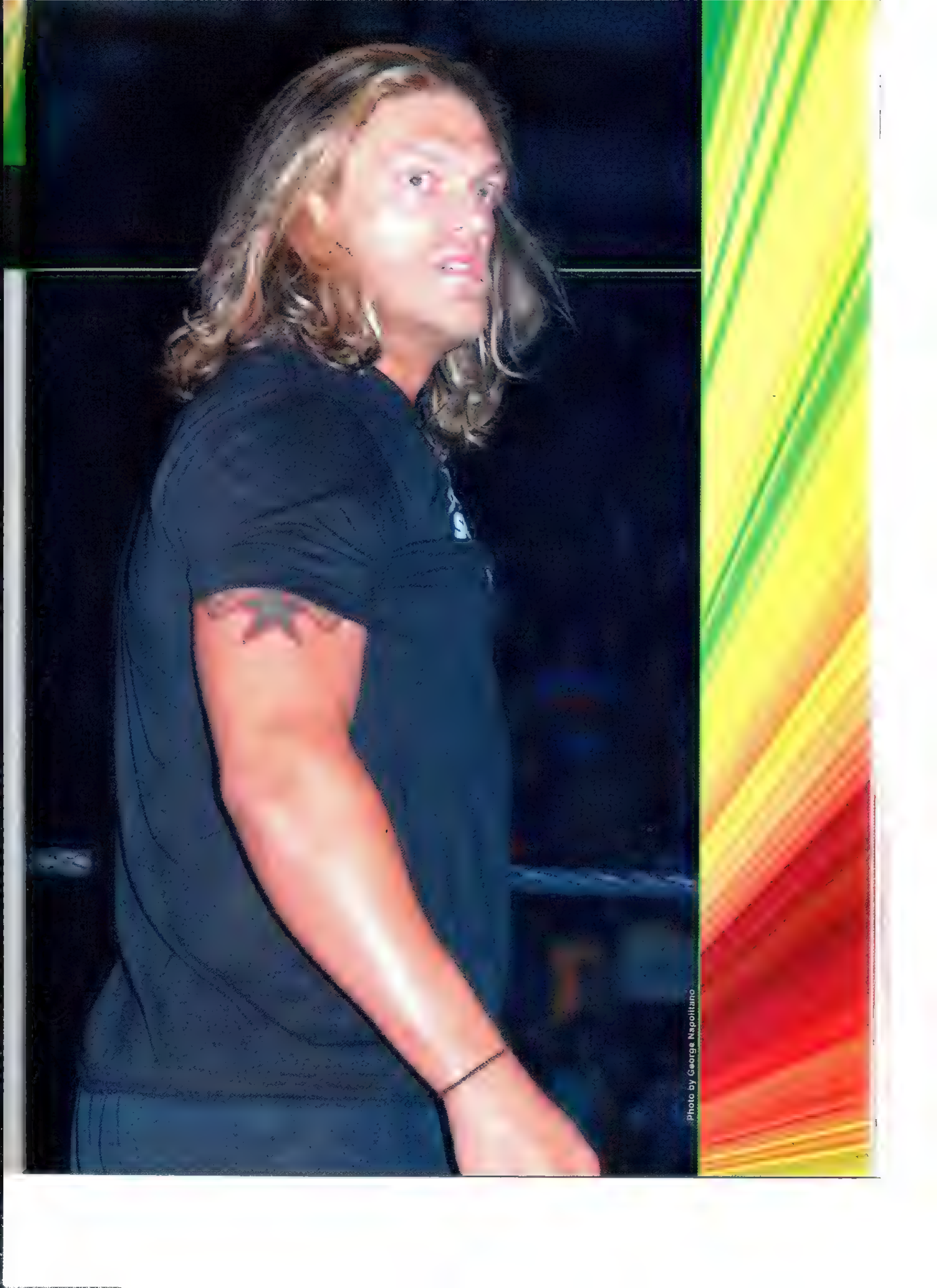
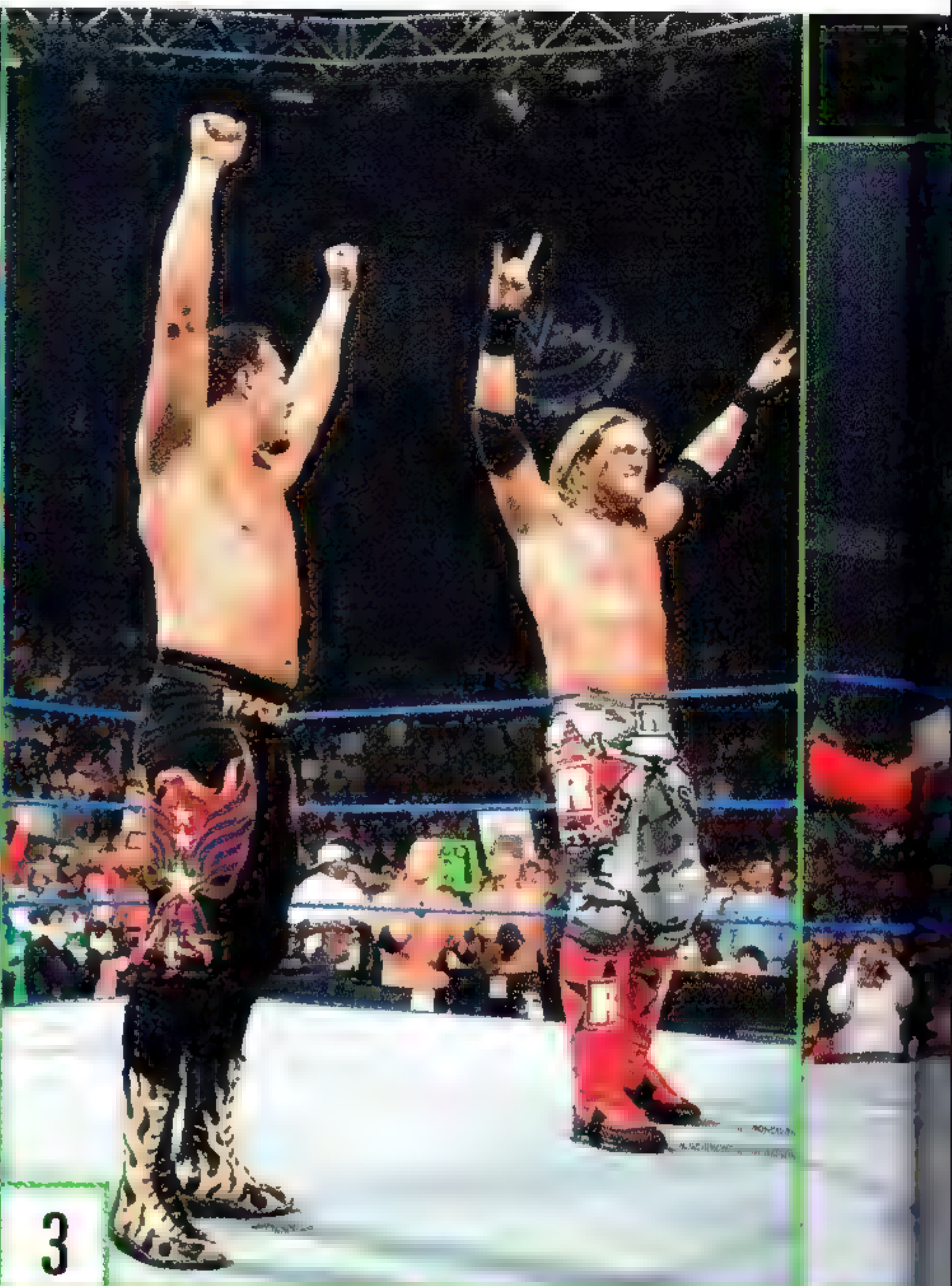
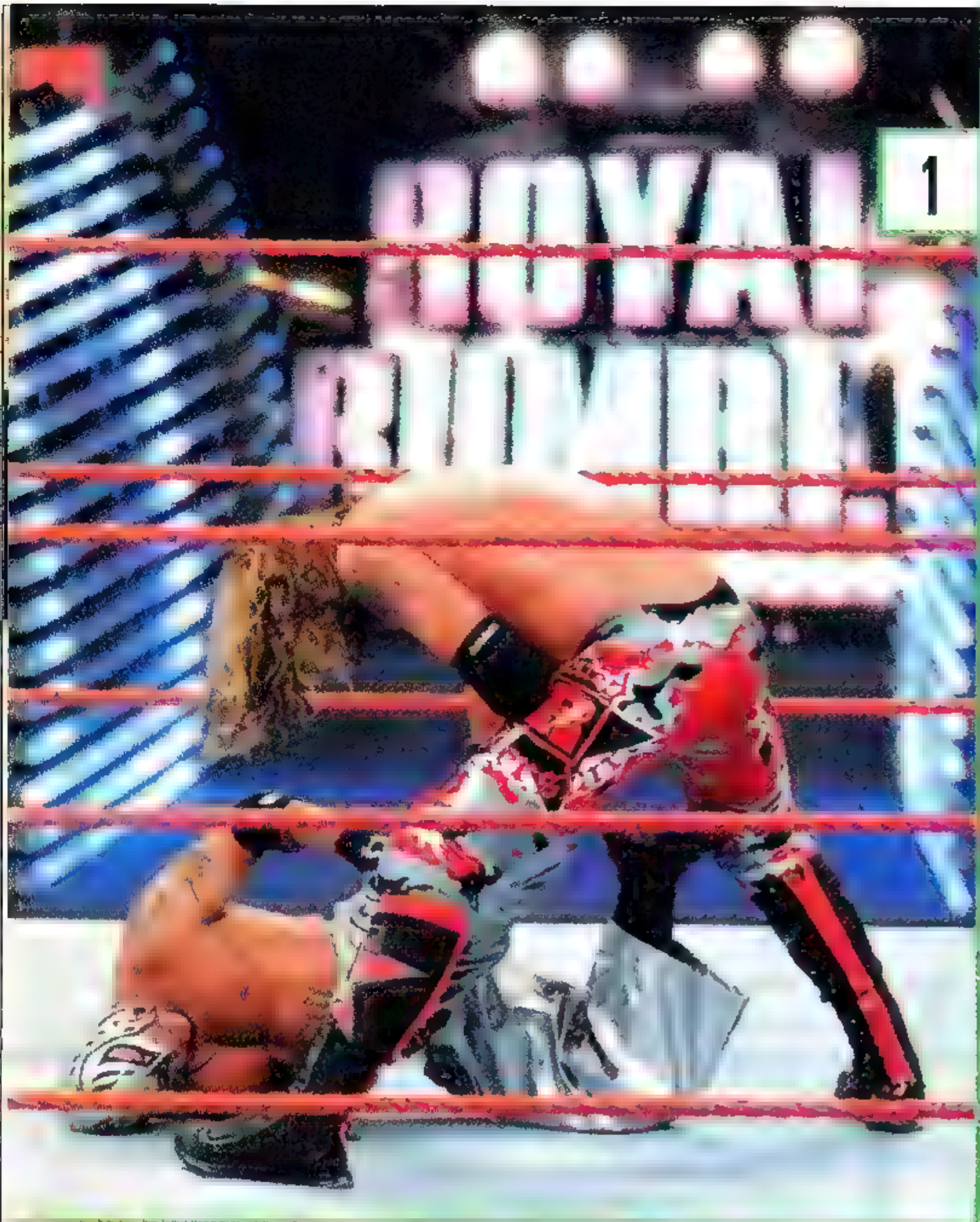


Photo by George Napolitano







# EDGE



1

Rey Mysterio was outraged by Edge's affair with Vickie Guerrero. Despite his best efforts to make Edge pay in the ring, Mysterio was never able to tame "The Rated R Superstar."

2

While recovering from his torn pectoral muscle, Edge "befriended" acting Smackdown General Manager Vickie Guerrero. This relationship was later revealed to be a love affair ... a love affair that benefited Edge in his return as a title contender.

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3

Edge understands the value in knowing people in high places and used his affair with Vickie to curry support from Chavo.

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4

Edge puts his shoulder into Rey Mysterio's diminutive sternum. The remarkably simplistic yet effective spear is just one of several set-up and finishing maneuvers Edge has perfected.

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5

Upon Edge's return at Survivor Series, he interfered in Batista and Undertaker's cage match. Batista won the match, but Edge made his return noticeable and his interest in regaining the Smackdown World title apparent.





# Motor City MACHINE GUNS

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** The moment Alex Shelley and Chris Sabin began teaming, we saw terrific potential. At times, they are reminiscent of classic teams like The Midnight Express and Tully Blanchard and Gino Hernandez. With their mix of innovation, attitude, and sex appeal, we figured it would just be a matter of time before the Motor City Machine Guns were wearing the TNA World tag belts. For some inexplicable reason, it hasn't happened as of press time. Sabin and Shelley lost their way when they got swept up in Team 3D's vendetta against the X division. While we commend them for standing up to Team 3D and helping save the X division, they inadvertently took themselves out of contention for the tag title. **GRADE: B**

**MARKETABILITY:** Sabin and Shelley are rare in that they appeal to two distinct (and highly discerning)

groups of fans: superfans who appreciate nuanced mat work and innovative counter-wrestling, and teenage girls who appreciate guys who look like they walked out off a *Real World* casting call. They've got a very sharp T-shirt and were featured on the promotional poster for the Destination X PPV. And when the makers of MTV's *Made* wanted wrestlers to help a high school student train for wrestling, they called on Sabin and Shelley precisely because they would appeal to the MTV audience. The only thing hurting them is that they haven't received high profile matches yet, and a lot of fans don't see them as viable contenders to the belts at this point. **GRADE: A-**

**REPERTOIRE:** Although they have only been regularly teaming for a short period of time, Sabin and Shelley have already developed about a dozen finely coordinated double-team attacks. They have their ASCS rush kick combination (a spin kick, followed by a superkick, followed by a double jumping enzuigiri), the baseball slide/hesitation dropkick combo, the Sabin power bomb into the Shelley backbreaker, and too many more to list here. The point is they have found a myriad ways to capitalize on their individual strengths, and that makes them the most exciting tandem in the sport today. **GRADE: A+**

**CAREER GROWTH:** The us-against-the-world attitude that makes Sabin and Shelley such a unique team may be the thing that is holding them back from breaking through the glass ceiling in TNA. Shelley and Sabin aren't the types who like to cozy up to management, and that's the kind of attitude that runs into more obstacles than opportunities. We also suspect that Shelley and Sabin are natural heels and just biding their time as fan favorites in an attempt to get a title shot against Styles and Tomko. Showing their true colors might give them the ingredient they have been lacking. **GRADE: B**

**OVERALL VALUE:** The Machine Guns can bring a shot of adrenaline to the TNA tag title. They are young, exciting, and one of the most marketable acts in the company. They're also two of the best young technicians in the sport. TNA is sitting on a gold mine with them. We wonder if they realize it. **GRADE: B+**



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling





Photo by Lee Sautter/NA Wrestling







# Motor City MACHINE GUNS



1

Chris Sabin risks his neck, landing his head and shoulders on Johnny Devine. Sabin and Alex Shelley are risk takers, willing to jeopardize their safety for a chance to achieve maximum effectiveness in their attacks.

2

Sabin watches from ringside as Shelley takes down Johnny Devine with a flying headscissors. The Motor City Machine Guns work well not only as a team, but also individually.

3

The Motor City Machine Guns are able to handle larger foes, such as Team 3D's Brother Ray, by combining their strength. Victims are often shocked at how quickly Shelley and Sabin can coordinate their efforts.

4

When one is down, the other is willing and able to step it up. Sabin and Shelley complement each other perfectly and watch each other's back in desperate times. Here, Shelley occupies Brother Devon, while Sabin recovers.

5

Although they have only been a team for a short while, The Motor City Machine Guns exhibit the precision of a veteran tag team. Here, Brother Ray feels the pain of such solidarity.



5



# MVP

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Montel Vontavious Porter is the fourth longest-reigning United States champion in the 33-year history of the title. Admittedly, the U.S. title has slipped a bit in prestige from the days when it was proudly worn by men like Lex Luger, Rick Rude, and Nikita Koloff (the three men who have had longer reigns than MVP as of this writing) in the NWA, but that shouldn't diminish MVP's accomplishment. The fact that he also won a Smackdown tag title while holding the U.S. title is even more impressive. However, MVP has suffered some prominent non-title losses during that time and missed some action after being diagnosed with a heart condition. While he has been a long-reigning champion, he hasn't exactly been a fighting champion. **GRADE: A**

**MARKETABILITY:** MVP is a great talker and has a unique look and style. In fact, we have a hunch that there's a great fan favorite deep inside that's just waiting to come out. MVP has quietly developed into one of the most skilled technical wrestlers in the game, largely because of his feud with Chris Benoit last year. If he stopped feuding with Matt Hardy and turned his attention to someone like Edge or Chavo Guerrero,

we have a feeling MVP could become one of WWE's most popular stars. **GRADE: B-**

**REPERTOIRE:** MVP's entire personality is off-target. While he presents himself as an arrogant, spotlight-craving showboat, his true strength isn't in his highlight-reel maneuvers, but in his excellent execution of details. For example, MVP is one of the best counter-wrestlers in the game. When he's caught in a hold, he quickly assesses the situation and either works his hands underneath his opponent's grip to get leverage to escape or applies pressure to a wrist or inside elbow to give himself the little bit of space he needs to free himself and counter. Pay close attention when he works a body part. He frequently adjusts his grip to provide maximum pressure on the joint. He thinks two or three moves ahead at all times. Don't be fooled by his Terrell Owens-like behavior. Look past the play-maker and flashy yakuza kick. Watch carefully and you'll see a true master at work. **GRADE: A+**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Despite his successes, MVP has had a few big setbacks over the past year. Because of WWE's decision to eradicate all mention of Benoit, people forget about the tremendous feud that culminated in him beating Benoit in two straight falls to win the U.S. title. There was also the heart condition that sidelined him. And then, just as his feud with Hardy was set to take off, Hardy was sidelined with an appendectomy. Every time he's about to take off, he loses his momentum. **GRADE: B**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Those setbacks have prevented MVP from realizing his full potential and graduating from the mid-card to the main-event level. Provided his heart condition doesn't hamper his progress, MVP is poised to become one of WWE's top stars of the next five years or so. He just needs his break. **GRADE: B+**



Rich Freeda/ WWE/Courtesy of CW Network





John Glamundo/WWE/Courtesy of CW Network





# DON'T MISS

## PWI UPDATE WITH FRANK INGIOSI

EXCLUSIVELY ON:  
[pwi-online.com](http://pwi-online.com)

*Pro Wrestling Illustrated* Senior Writer Frank Ingiosi is insightful, provocative, and downright funny! You've read "The Trade's Mark" in *PWI*. Now check out Frank's column, "The Turn," every Friday afternoon.

**Ingiosi on Mark Henry:** "We've tried channeling our angst as a way to hopefully motivate Mark. You know, Internet-column tough love and whatnot. But, alas, our desires were met with more mediocrity and disappointment. At the very least we hoped Mark would ditch his angry image and just return to the always-lovable 'Sexual Chocolate'-style ways. Sadly, there would be no chocolate for us, sexual or otherwise."

**Ingiosi on Jeff Hardy turning 30:** "From all of us at "The Turn," happy birthday, Jeff. Keep up the great work. We wanted to get you something, but apparently there isn't a Cameron-area orthopedic surgeon that sells gift certificates."

**Ingiosi on "Pacman" Jones in TNA:** "Now we're left with a tag team in which one man can wrestle and the other's greatest contribution is taking his shirt off and scurrying around the ring goading his opponents into easily avoided situations. Does it work? No. Is it a draw? Can't imagine that it is. Is it insulting to the fans? Probably to some, yet they still go nuts for Team Pacman each time they enter the Impact Zone."

**Frank Ingiosi ...**  
**on [pwi-online.com](http://pwi-online.com)!**

7813/10 07







1

His yakuza kick can bring giants like Kane to their knees, but once they are down, it is Montel Vontavious Porter's grappling that has kept his U.S. title reign intact. He likes to showboat, but don't underestimate his in-ring abilities.

2

MVP is one of WWE's most talented technical wrestlers, as his feud with Chris Benoit proved last year. But his selection of opponents must get better. Instead of feuding with Kane, MVP should be targeting titleholders.

3

Despite being diagnosed with Wolff-Parkinson-White syndrome in October 2007, Montel Vontavious Porter brought Ric Flair up to the limit in their matches. The "Nature Boy" barely kept his job by eking out wins over MVP.

4

MVP just keeps losing any momentum he is able to build. First the aftermath of the Benoit tragedy halted the hype of his impressive U.S. title win, and then his Smackdown title reign and feud with partner Matt Hardy sank due to health problems for both men.

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3



4



# Kevin NASH

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** We don't know how he does it, but Kevin Nash always seems to be able to keep himself relevant and ready to step right back into the main-event picture at a moment's notice. He has overcome 17 knee surgeries and a heart scare that kept him out of 2005's *Bound for Glory*. By all rights, his career probably should have ended after that episode. But "Big Sexy" got a new lease on life when he took Samoa Joe under his wing and stood up to his former friend, Kurt Angle. With strong showings against the Angle Alliance, Nash will likely be a leading contender for *PWI's* Comeback of the Year award. **GRADE: A+**



Photo by Lise South/TNA Wrestling

**MARKETABILITY:** The NWO was second only to Steve Austin in the amount of merchandise sold in the 1990s, so Nash has a proven record in the marketability department. While he's currently in the fans' good graces thanks to his association with Joe, there are a whole lot of Nash haters out there. Those critics blame Nash for everything from destroying WCW to making a mockery of the X division. Nash is most marketable in the position he is in now—an upper-card enforcer. If he were to receive a bigger push as a singles wrestler, the Nash backlash would be in full swing again. **GRADE: B**

**REPERTOIRE:** At this stage of his career, Nash is barely mobile, and he knows it. He has simplified his game plan to moves that capitalize on his tremendous size and power. He stands still and lets opponents charge him. Then he unloads with big overhand rights, kicks, and clotheslines. His knee strikes in the corner are still lethal, and the snake eyes and jackknife are still enough to put most opponents down for the count. He may only have five or six moves in his arsenal, but they work. **GRADE: C**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Nash took a lot of flak for "holding back" younger stars. Perhaps the most telling comment he's ever uttered came eight years ago when he referred to Chris Benoit and Dean Malenko as "vanilla midgets." He had little respect for the technical side of the game or for undersized wrestlers. But in the past few years, Nash seems to have softened his stance. He helped Jay Lethal and Sonjay Dutt develop their showmanship. He worked with Samoa Joe to help him channel his frustration and get his career back on track. Believe it or not, Nash finally looks like he's ready to give something back to the sport. Nash can still help make new stars, and his willingness to do so has made him more important to the sport than he has been in a decade. **GRADE: A**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Nash serves a vital role in TNA. He has name recognition and star appeal, he can still deliver entertaining matches, and he's willing to share the spotlight. Frankly, there aren't many stars like Nash left in wrestling. He's a valuable commodity. **GRADE: B+**



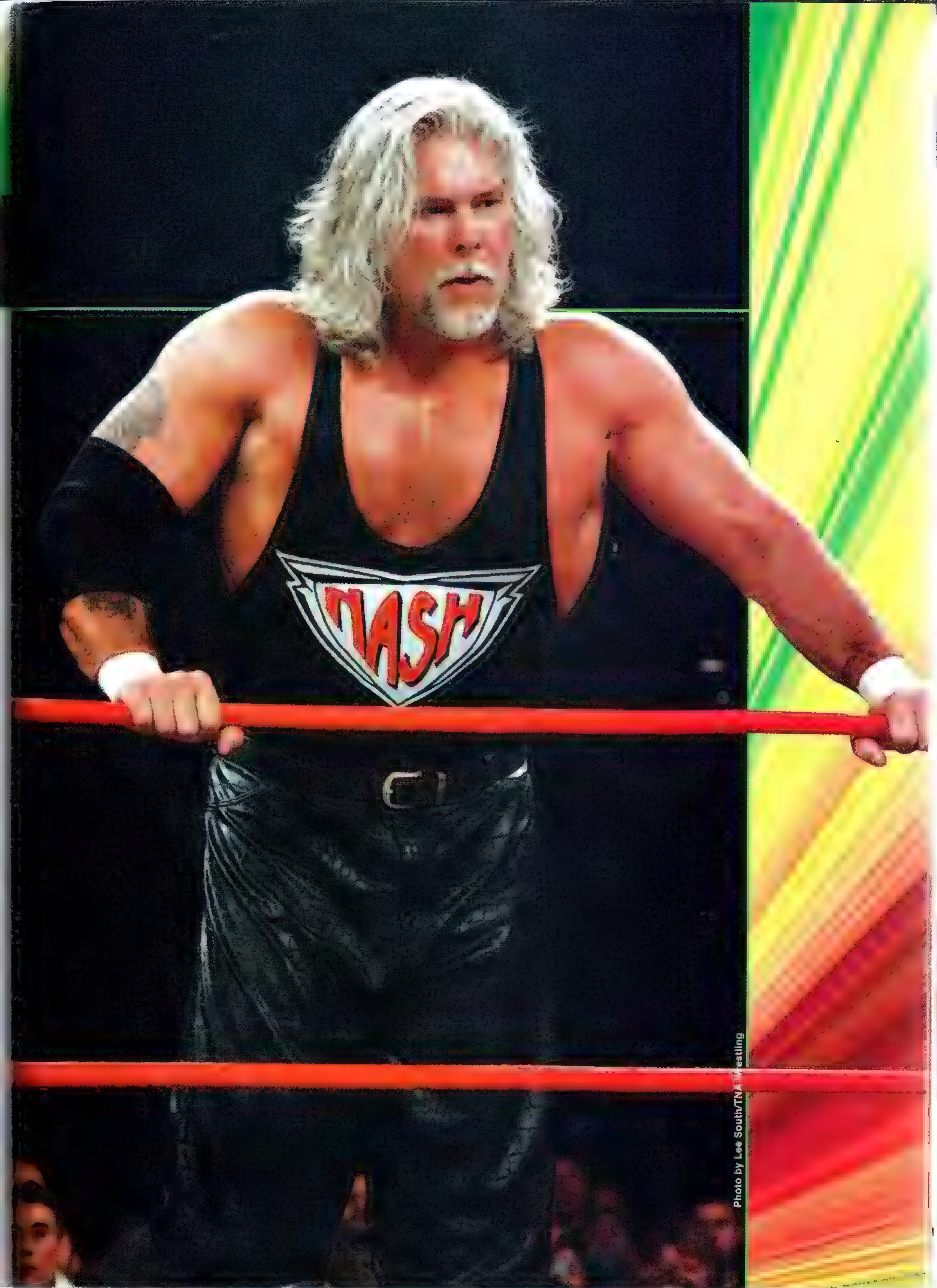


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



Kevin

NASH

1

Kevin Nash has been criticized for keeping younger wrestlers down. Here, after sending A.J. Styles to the canvas, you can almost see "Big Sexy" thinking of ways he can keep him there – literally.

2

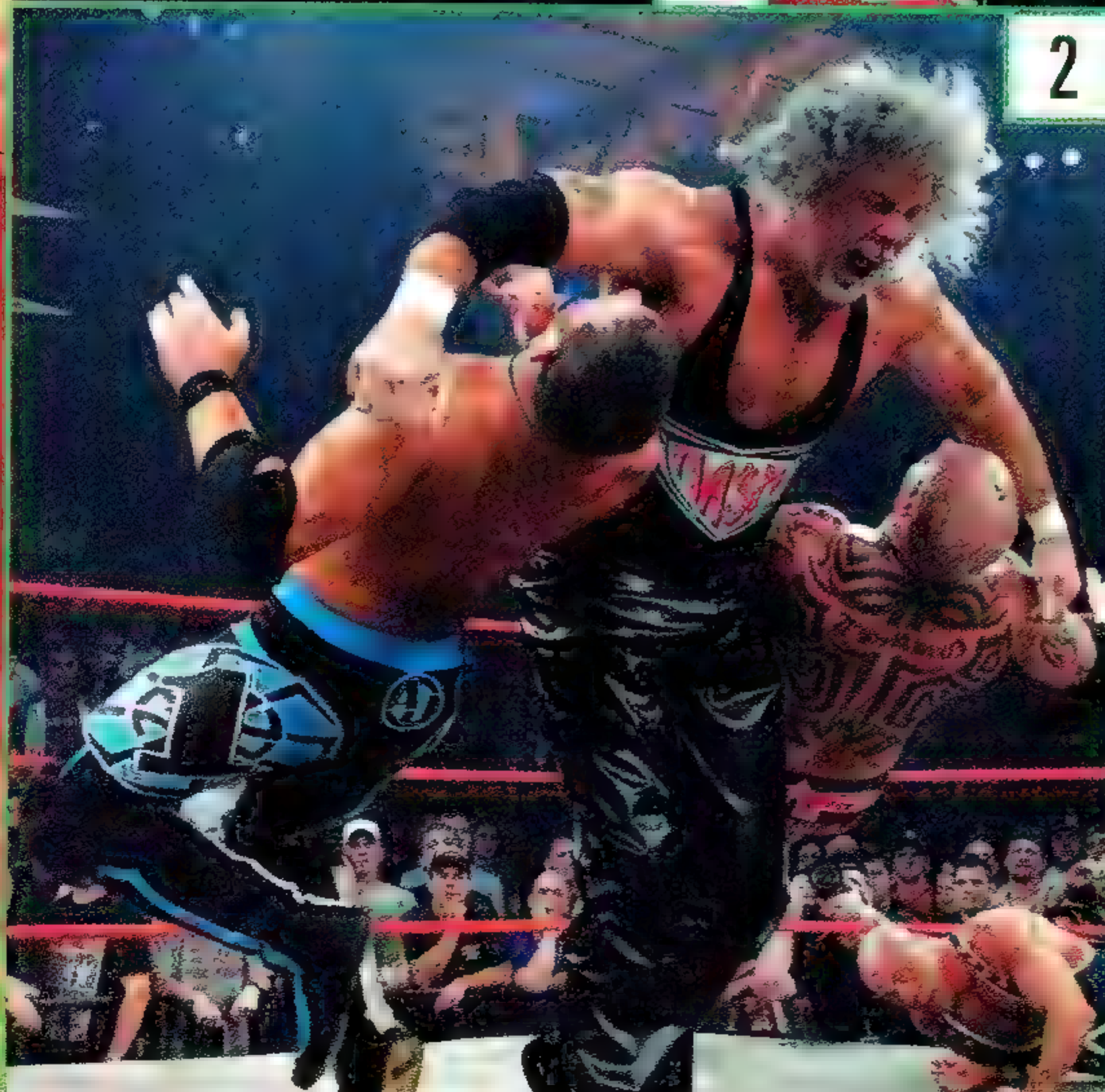
Aside from his 6'10" frame and nasty disposition in the ring, Nash offers TNA the kind of star power and name recognition it needs to build its brand. Just ask Styles and Tyson Tomko, who are seeing stars after this double clothesline.

3

Never known for his agility, time and injuries have made Nash less mobile than ever. However, Nash's reliance on power-based moves, like this clothesline, makes him a threat to anyone who steps in the ring with him.



1



2

3





# Beth

# PHOENIX

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** "The Glamazon" stands alone at the top of the heap of WWE Divas. She demolished Candice Michelle to win the women's title at No Mercy and has yet to be seriously challenged since. She must be frustrated by the fact that her impressive title reign has been overshadowed by Maria appearing in *Playboy*. Everyone is talking about Maria and overlooking the most dominant WWE women's champion since Chyna. Beth needs to be challenged by someone like Victoria or Jazz ... or, dare we say, Trish Stratus, before she grows complacent and starts getting sloppy, which could cost her the title. **GRADE: A**

**MARKETABILITY:** Since she was a little girl, Beth wanted to become a wrestler. She has trained with that goal in mind for most of her life. She's a very attractive woman, but she's a wrestler first and foremost, not a would-be model who lucked into the business through a Diva Search competition. She's not about to pose for *Playboy* or get in silly lingerie pillow fights, so she's not going to sell as many photos, posters, and DVDs as say, Kelly Kelly or Maria. She is

appreciated by fans who admire her wrestling ability, but she doesn't care to "sex it up" to garner attention. She just wins matches. **GRADE: B**

**REPERTOIRE:** It's easy to concentrate on Beth's physical strength and pigeonhole her as a pure power wrestler. She frequently wrestled against men in the independent ranks before making it to WWE. In those matches, she was at a distinct disadvantage in the strength department, which forced her to develop other skills. She developed a nice slingshot suplex to utilize the ropes against larger opponents, and will often use chinlocks or a variation of the camel clutch to target a foe's lower back to mitigate their strength advantage. She hasn't used these moves too often in WWE yet because she simply hasn't had to. Again, she needs a more varied quality of opposition or those skills are going to atrophy. **GRADE: B**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Phoenix realized her life's goal at No Mercy. Now she needs to set new goals. Maybe she can concentrate on extending her reign for a full year, or maybe lobby to defend her title against contenders from the Smackdown and ECW rosters as well. She is the champion, but a dearth of competition is threatening to make her stale. She's also going to have to prove that she can recover once the inevitable happens and she loses the title. If her aura of invincibility fades, she'll lose the psychological advantage she enjoys over most opponents. Unless she puts a plan in place, the next crop of Diva Search girls looking for their big break could overrun Beth. **GRADE: B**

**OVERALL VALUE:** In some ways, Phoenix reminds us of Sherri Martel. Sherri was so much better than her competition at the time that she had to start managing male wrestlers just to stay active. Beth may want to consider doing the same unless WWE signs some established women wrestlers or moves Victoria back to Raw. **GRADE: B+**



Photo by George Napolitano



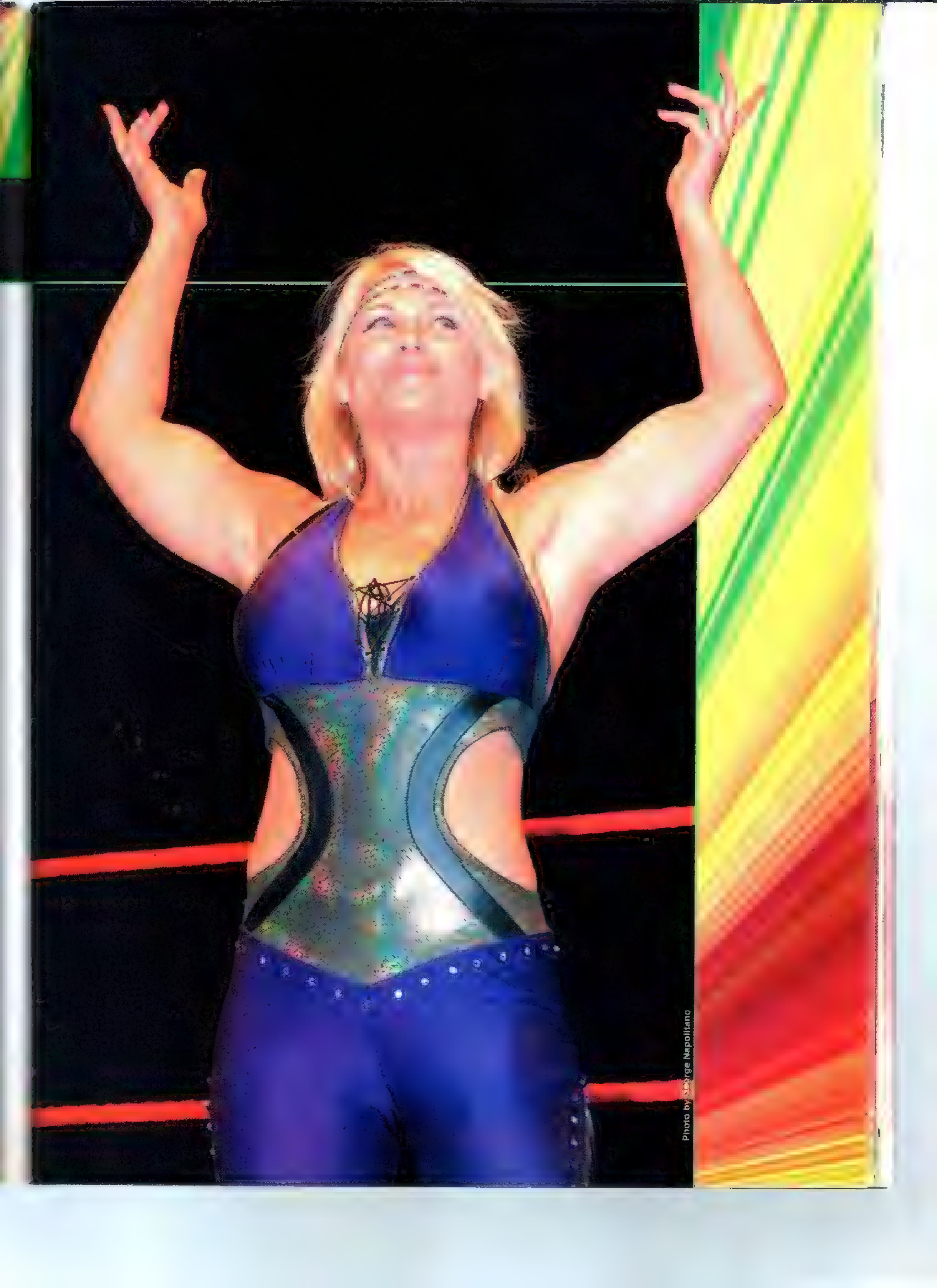


Photo by George Napolitano







Beth

PHOENIX

1

Beth Phoenix has Mickie James right where she wants her. After competing against men on the independent circuit, "The Glamazon" doesn't have much trouble with most women.

2

Phoenix is the powerhouse of WWE's women's division. Her vicious slams have put Candice Michelle out of commission, and if James isn't careful, she could be the next Diva on the DL.

3

On October 7, 2007, at No Mercy, Phoenix claimed the WWE women's title, defeating then-champ Michelle. Two weeks later on Raw, Phoenix eliminated Candice in a rematch for the women's title, breaking the GoDaddy girl's clavicle.

4

Phoenix and Melina make an effective pair indeed. However, the Latina may eventually turn out to be a tough challenge for the current women's champ, maybe Beth's toughest to date.

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5

Phoenix is not in WWE to get on to a *Playboy* cover. Nor is she interested in cozying up next to the next World champion. She is interested in keeping her women's title away from the former champions, like Michelle.

4

5





# Samoa

# JOE

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Blame it on TNA management or on Samoa Joe himself, but the "Samoan Submission Machine" has underachieved since joining TNA in 2005. For nearly a year, Joe was the company's juggernaut, owning the X division and destroying everyone in his path. Then Sting leapfrogged Joe in the title hunt, followed by Kurt Angle. It took several altercations with Kevin Nash for Joe to get his head on right and understand that if he wants a World title shot, he needs to take matters into his own hands and force the issue. In anticipation for his big Lockdown rematch against Angle, Joe went into serious training and vowed to never again appear on *Impact* if he losses. With that super clash weeks away as of this writing, we have no way of knowing if Joe finally wins the gold. But we do know he has finally done what he needed to do get his career back on track. Still, he hadn't achieved his ultimate goal as of press time. **GRADE: B**



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

**MARKETABILITY:** It looked like Joe's popularity was starting to wane after he failed to win the title despite several opportunities in 2007, and he ended the year complaining and whining about it to everyone in his path. He publicly aired his many frustrations at Turning Point, and while it may have ticked off Nash and TNA management, Joe's tirade won over a lot of fans who had been growing frustrated with TNA matchmaking. Now, instead of complaining about how he doesn't get title shots, he is in the driver's seat, and it's a lot easier to rally behind a calm, cool, and collected challenger than a crybaby. Just ask Bret Hart. **GRADE: A**

**REPERTOIRE:** This is the most difficult category to assess this year because we have no idea what Joe's secretive training regimen entails. Angle is holding public sparring sessions where he is showcasing his quick takedowns, various submission locks and chokes, and knockout striking power. Is Joe also taking an MMA-style approach and working on his ground-and-pound game? Or is he taking a more conventional approach and working to improve his cardio conditioning and quickness to counter Angle's attacks and beat him to the punch? We don't know the answer. We do know Joe is an elite striker and has some of the best suplex variations in the game. But in his matches against Angle to date, Angle has always had just a little something that Joe didn't have. For all we know, Joe is fixing that problem right now. **GRADE: A-**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Through the past six months, Joe has turned things around and now looks as physical and dangerous as he ever has. If he wins the belt at Lockdown, he's in position to rule TNA throughout 2008. If he losses, it could be a long time before we see him in TNA again. **GRADE: A-**

**OVERALL VALUE:** We admit it. We're caught up in the Joe hype as Lockdown gets closer. We've done that before and Joe has disappointed us each time. His value ultimately depends on how he fares in the six sides of steel this April. **GRADE: B+**





Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



# PWI TURNS 25!

PRO Wrestling ILLUSTRATED



Pro Wrestling Illustrated recently celebrated its 25th year as the sport's number-one publication in a very special way. Those who subscribe to *PWI* or spotted it at the newsstand in time got a treat. Not only did *PWI* produce a silver anniversary special, but as an added bonus, we polybagged a re-print of our very first issue, from 1979!

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1

2







3

1

Samoa Joe was unhappy Eric Young had to serve as a replacement for the scheduled Scott Hall at Turning Point in December 2007, but Joe and his team managed to pull off a win against the Angle Alliance.

2

Joe let loose on TNA management at Turning Point 2008. His rant puzzled some people and didn't have the reaction he anticipated. But venting may have allowed Joe to concentrate on more important matters. Now he's done talking.

3

Joe can still dominate the X division, but his success has been more sporadic in heavyweight competition. Jay Lethal is glad to see Joe concentrating more on Kurt Angle's title, because it means the "Samoa Submission Machine" will leave "Black Machismo" and his X title alone.

4

The domination of the Angle Alliance in TNA inspired Kevin Nash, Christian Cage, and Samoa Joe to form their own counter faction. Destination X in Norfolk, Virginia, saw Joe's team defeat Angle's, when Tomko submitted to Joe's kokina clutch.

Samoa Joe



4



# Scott

# STEINER

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** "Big Poppa Pump" is finally starting to go back to his freaky ways. He has a World title shot he can cash in at any time. He introduced a new lovely lady to watch his back in Rhaka Khan. And he took "Maple Leaf Muscle" Petey Williams under his wing. We appreciated the Steiners' reunion last year, but let's face the facts: At this stage of his career, Scott Steiner is best suited for singles wrestling. While he'd have to be considered a dark horse candidate to win the TNA title, he certainly has the experience to get the job done. If the stars line up in just the right

way, Steiner could collect the second world title of his career. And with him putting together a stable of people around him, he certainly looks like he's gearing himself up for another run. **GRADE: B+**

**MARKETABILITY:** Steiner can still cut some darn good promos, and from "Big Poppa Pump" to "Freakzilla," he's always coming up with cool nicknames that look awfully good on a T-shirt (you should see the *PWI* staff in our "Big Bad Booty Daddy" tank tops!) A disappointing run in WWE hurt, but he looks to be on a bit of an upswing. **GRADE: B**

**REPERTOIRE:** Steiner was an All-American at the University of Michigan, and he knows far more about takedowns, reverses, and counters than he shows. His move set almost entirely consists of power moves, but few adversaries are foolish enough to try to outwrestle him on the mat. Steiner has been using his old Frankenstein a bit more lately, which adds a new element to his game. He could still stand to lose a little muscle mass in favor of greater speed and mobility. **GRADE: B+**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Steiner's career almost came to an end last summer when he suffered a life-threatening throat injury in a match in Puerto Rico. That very scary incident seems to have reawakened Steiner's passion. Ever since his return, he's had a renewed focus and purpose. It's good to see Steiner so rejuvenated, and it's good to see him working with Williams. **GRADE: B+**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Steiner hasn't been able to match up with Kurt Angle or Samoa Joe yet, but now that his competitive fires are burning bright, he might just be able to pull off a win. If he falls short (and we expect he will), it will be interesting to see the niche he carves out on the mid-card. Will he and "Maple Leaf Muscle" go for the tag belts? Could Steiner try his hand in the X division? Or will his drive once again fade away and put him back on the mid-card treadmill? And is he serious about becoming a mentor to younger wrestlers or is he just trying to manipulate Williams for his own gain? **GRADE: B+**



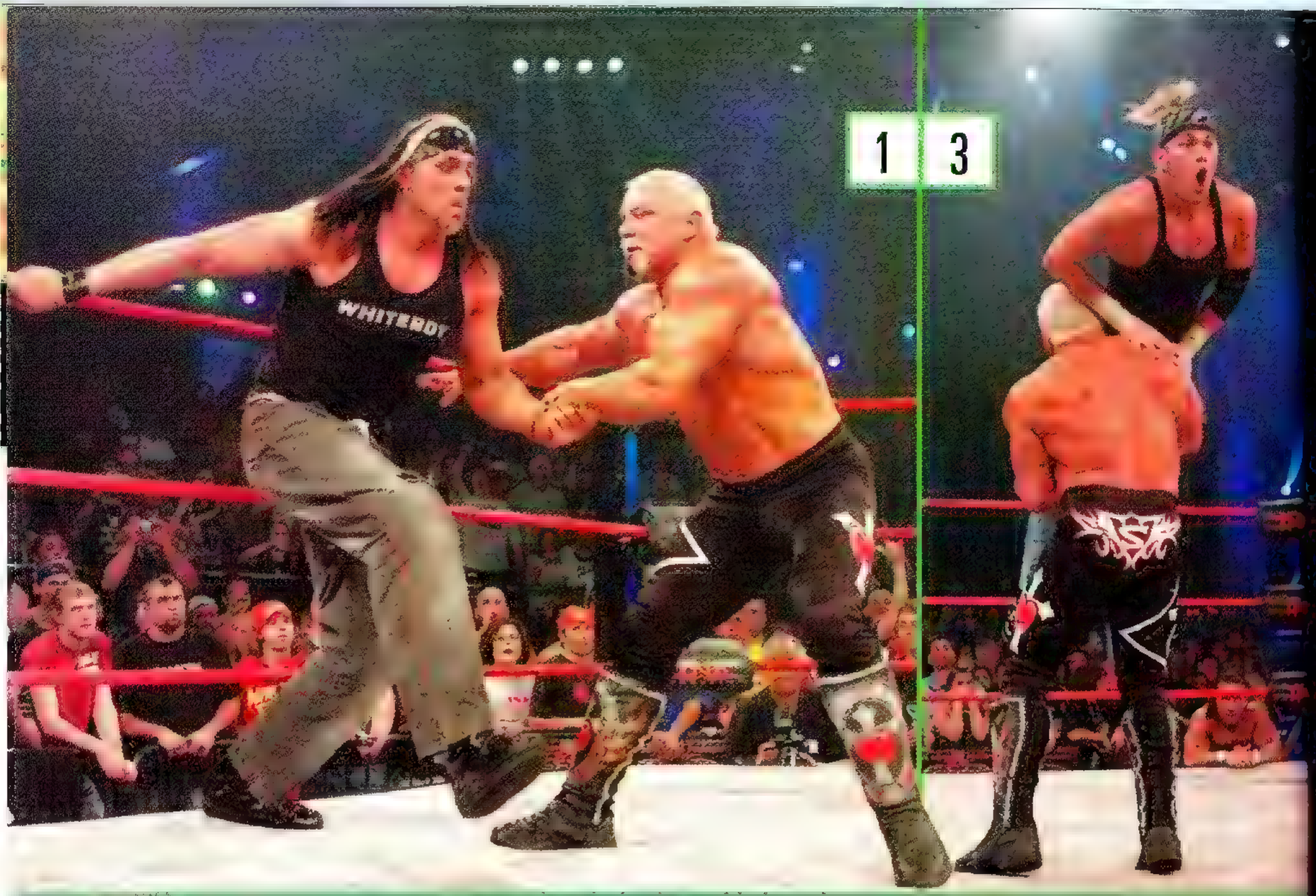
Photo by George Tan nos





Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling







Scott

# STEINER



1

When Scott Steiner suffered a life-threatening freak trachea injury last year, many believed his career was over. But Steiner bounced back quickly and made his return to competition a mere month later. Now he is back in full swing ... much to the chagrin of emerging TNA talent like Lance Hoyt.

2

During the "Feast Or Fired" fiasco, Steiner and Petey Williams developed a mutual respect for each other's talents. Now it seems Steiner might have another tag team title run on the horizon. But as Steiner has proven in the past, anything can happen where "Freakzilla" is concerned.

3

Even though many of his opponents keep Steiner away from the mat—in fear that his amateur grappling experience will be their downfall—"Freakzilla" is versatile enough to handle a variety of opponents' styles.

4

Although the reunion of the Steiner Brothers was short-lived, TNA was left with the more dynamic Steiner, Scott. Scott was an impressive tag team talent back in the day, but now singles competition is more his thing, considering the strength and experience advantage he holds over his competition. No wonder Williams chose him as an advisor.

5

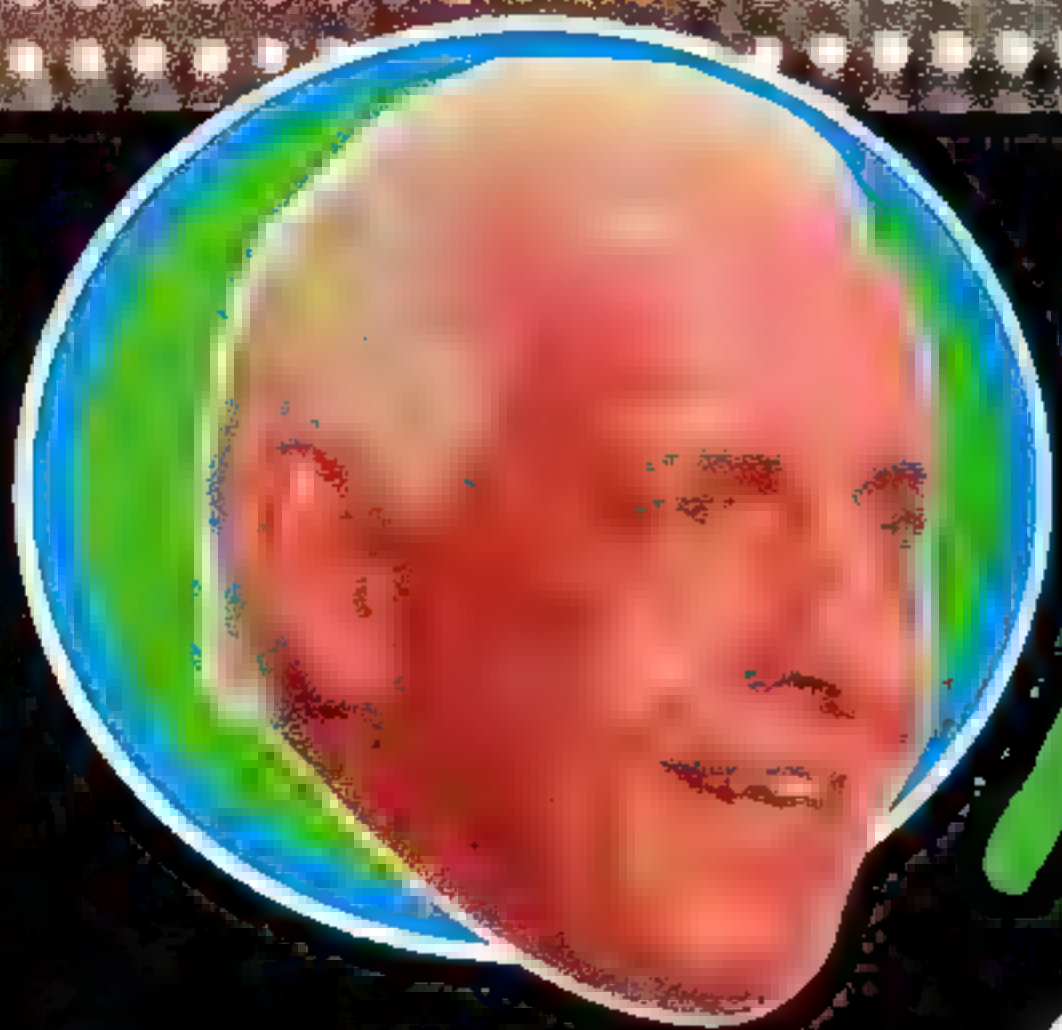
"Maple Leaf Muscle" will never be "Big Poppa Pump," but he sure can try. After trying to defeat "Freakzilla," Williams decided to adopt him as a mentor. Steiner has a lot to teach Williams about strength. Maybe Williams will teach his mentor that unnecessary bulk can be a hindrance.

4

5







# Ric Flair's Career

## A YEAR-BY-YEAR REPORT CARD

COMPILED BY **TIM DRAKE & AL CASTLE**

**K**NOWING AS WE all did that Ric Flair's WrestleMania 24 match against Shawn Michaels might well be his last, WWE worked hard in the weeks leading up to the historic bout to encapsulate the Flair era through a series of videos highlighting his career. No four-minute video package could come close to capturing the many highs and lows of Flair's career. Nor could any magazine article.

That being said, here is our ambitious attempt to do just that. In this "report card" of Flair's career, we have graded each year of the "Nature Boy's" storied run. And despite the many world title wins, Matches

of the Year, and star-making performances, not every year of Flair's career deserved an "A" grade. The greatest of all-time had his share of lowlights, some of which Flair may have hoped you had forgotten. Does the name The Black Scorpion ring a bell? Does anyone remember "The Magnificent Seven" of the dying days of WCW?

But regardless of some misses along the way, the sum of the numerous chapters of Flair's career is a treasure of wrestling history, from his earliest days through the dominant reign of The Four Horsemen, past his frustrations in WCW, and all the way to his WWE Hall of Fame induction. This is the career of the "Nature Boy" Ric Flair.

# 1973

In all likelihood, none of the fans who saw Flair in his rookie year had any notion that he would one day dominate the sport. In 1972, when he was still just Richard Fliehr, a college dropout from Edina, Minnesota, the future champion enrolled in the famed wrestling school run by Verne Gagne, the owner and World champion of the American Wrestling Association. The tenacity and athleticism the 23-year-old demonstrated during his training won him a job with the AWA. He adopted the ring name "Rick Flair" (he would retain the 'k' for a few more years), and, on December 10, 1972, in Rice Lake, Minnesota, he wrestled his first match—a 10-minute time-limit draw against George "Scrap Iron" Gadaski.

In the months that followed, Flair worked the bottom of AWA cards, losing most of his matches. His most frequent vanquisher was Gagne's son, Greg, who was being groomed as the next AWA superstar. One of Flair's few victories was over a young Roddy Piper. In all his matches, Flair showed that he was not only well versed in the fundamentals of the sport, but that he had an unusual capacity to absorb punishment. Nevertheless, his bulky 280-pound frame clearly hampered his mobility, and, as 1973 drew to a close, he had yet to develop the ring intelligence that all main-eventers must possess.

**Grade: D**



## Ric Flair's Career: A Report Card

# 1974

For the first four months of 1974, Flair continued to refine his craft as a preliminary wrestler in the AWA. Flair's diligence was rewarded in April when George Scott, matchmaker for the Carolinas-based Jim Crockett Promotions, offered him a tryout. Scott saw great potential in Flair and offered him a job. At Scott's suggestion, Flair dyed his hair blond and donned multi-colored trunks. On May 15, he made his debut for JCP, defeating Abe Jacobs with his new finishing move, the off-the-rope kneedrop. Flair soon formed a team with one of the territory's best-known rulebreakers, Rip Hawk, who had recently split from his long-time partner Swede Hanson.

On July 4, Hawk and Flair defeated Paul Jones and Bob Bruggers for the Mid-Atlantic tag team championship. Hawk was very much the leader of the team, and Flair's ring work steadily improved under the veteran's guidance. But six months into their partnership, Hawk unexpectedly left JCP. On December 12, Flair and Brute Bernard, who was subbing for Hawk, lost the Mid-Atlantic tag title to Jones and his new partner Tiger Conway. Even with the title loss, there was no doubt that Flair's career had come a long way in just seven months.

**Grade: C-**

# 1975

Hawk's departure prompted Flair to focus on making a name for himself in JCP's singles division. He had begun to slim down, and he developed into a master tactician. Moreover, he took to calling himself the "Nature Boy," which had been the nickname of Buddy Rogers, the former NWA and WWF World champion whose move set and arrogant persona Flair emulated.

On February 8, he defeated Jones for the Mid-Atlantic TV championship. The title was regularly defended on Crockett's programs, which meant that Flair soon emerged as one of the promotion's most recognized mid-carders. His first reign as a singles champion included memorable matches against Olympic powerlifter Ken Patera and Jones, who, after a number of attempts, regained the title on August 8. Undeterred, Flair set his sights on Wahoo McDaniel's Mid-Atlantic championship. On September 20, in a hair-vs.-title match, Flair pinned McDaniel, who at the time was arguably JCP's top fan favorite.



Ric Flair vs. Wahoo McDaniel

Flair's victory signaled his ascension to the main-event ranks (and he was belatedly voted Rookie of the Year). But then, on October 5, a passenger plane carrying Flair, Johnny Valentine, Tim "Mr. Wrestling" Woods, Bruggers, and announcer David Crockett crashed just outside of Wilmington, North Carolina. Flair broke his back in three places, and it seemed all but certain that his promising career was over.

*PWI Award: Rookie of the Year*

**Grade: B+**



## Ric Flair's Career: A Report Card

# 1976

In early-January, Flair, having beaten the odds to make a full recovery, appeared on television for the first time since the accident and proceeded to enrage fans by tearing up the "get well" cards they had sent him.

At a trim 240 pounds, he never looked better, and on January 31, he made his ring return, successfully defending the Mid-Atlantic title against McDaniel. His battles against the great Native American grappler made for JCP's feud of the year. He dropped the championship to McDaniel on May 3, regaining it just three weeks later in a famously bloody match. The indefatigable McDaniel beat Flair for the belt on September 11 and lost it to him again on October 16 before finally settling the feud with a decisive win on December 27.

Flair could take the loss in stride, though, because one night earlier, he had become a world tag team titlist. In the fall, he had formed a partnership with newcomer Greg Valentine. The duo, who wowed fans with their innovative double-team maneuvers, soon butted heads with longtime NWA World tag team champions Ole and Gene Anderson, Flair's former allies. When Flair and Valentine triumphed over the Andersons in their December 26 title match, it felt to many fans as though the new generation had arrived.

**Grade: A-**



Ric Flair and Greg Valentine

# 1977

Flair was sidelined with a shoulder injury for the first three months of the year, but upon his return, he quickly made up for lost time by defeating Rufus R. Jones for the Mid-Atlantic TV title on April 5. Flair and Valentine soon resumed their war with the Andersons, dropping the World tag team title to the "Minnesota Wrecking Crew" in a brutal cage match on May 8. From there, Flair began his classic feud with Rick Steamboat, then a virtual unknown. After several heated verbal confrontations, they battled for the first time on June 15, with Steamboat upsetting Flair for the TV title.

Even as he pursued revenge against Steamboat, Flair continued teaming with Valentine, and the duo won the Mid-Atlantic tag title from Tiger Conway Jr. and Dino Bravo on June 30. Flair next captured the U.S. championship from the legendary Bobo Brazil on July 29.

This victory made Flair the top man in JCP, but it soon appeared that Steamboat had his number. Steamboat and Paul Jones dethroned Flair and Valentine on August 22. Then, on October 21, Steamboat ended Flair's first U.S. title reign. But Flair bounced back nine days later when he and Valentine regained the World tag team title from the Andersons, in the process breaking Gene's neck. Flair closed the year with a bloody showdown against Andre the Giant. Incredibly, in seven months, Flair had won four of JCP's five championships!

**PWI Awards:** Tag Team of the Year (with Greg Valentine, third runner-up); Match of the Year (vs. Andre the Giant, second runner-up); Most Hated (first runner-up)

**Grade: A**



## Ric Flair's Career: A Report Card

# 1978

Flair and Valentine ruled the tag team division for five months, but, because they frequently saved their belts by getting themselves disqualified or counted out, Crockett stripped them of the title on April 5. Once again, Flair would not allow a professional setback to demoralize him. On April 9, he regained the U.S. championship, defeating Mr. Wrestling in a hair-vs.-title match. Initially, Flair's main challenger was Blackjack Mulligan, who had been his tag team partner. After prevailing over Mulligan (largely because of a \$10,000 bounty he placed on his former ally's head), Flair found himself back in the ring with Steamboat.

On June 30, Flair and Valentine were awarded the vacant Mid-Atlantic tag team title, which they lost to Steamboat and Jones on August 5. Flair then teamed

up with John Studd to recapture the tag belts on June 30, this time dropping them back to Jones and Steamboat only six days later. The tag bouts were only one part of a larger war between Flair and Steamboat. Their one-on-one matches were unquestionably among the best of this decade and the next.

At year's end, Steamboat, who had won the U.S. title on December 18, held the edge in the feud, but it was far from over. It was clear that JCP was on a roll, and no one doubted that Flair was the promotion's top star.

**PWI Awards:** Most Hated; Match of the Year (vs. Blackjack Mulligan, first runner-up)

**Grade: A**

# 1979

Flair and Steamboat had many more brilliant matches in the first quarter of 1979, including one on April 1 in which Flair recaptured the U.S. title. By mid-year, Flair, a perennial rulebreaker, unexpectedly became JCP's most popular wrestler. Flair's style didn't really change—only his opponents did.

In December 1978, Jones had betrayed Steamboat and joined forces with Flair. On April 22, Jones put the knife in Flair's back as well. Now with a common enemy, Flair and Steamboat formed a dream team. Flair also joined forces with Mulligan, and, on August 8, they won the NWA World tag team title from Jones and Baron Von Raschke. Because the NWA no longer permitted dual titlists, Flair vacated the U.S. championship. He lost his remaining championship on August 22, when Jones and Von Raschke regained the tag title.

By this point, Flair was already involved in an even higher profile feud, against 58-year-old Buddy Rogers. Rogers sneak-attacked Flair during an interview segment, which led to the "Battle Of The Nature Boys" on July 9. In one of the most significant wins of his career, Flair forced his childhood hero to submit to the figure-four leglock, the hold each man used as his finisher. Rogers soon assembled an army of grapplers to avenge his defeat. As the '70s ended, Flair was increasingly seen as the future of the sport.

**PWI Award:** Inspirational Wrestler of the Year (first runner-up)

**Grade: A-**



Ric Flair vs. Buddy Rogers



## Ric Flair's Career: A Report Card

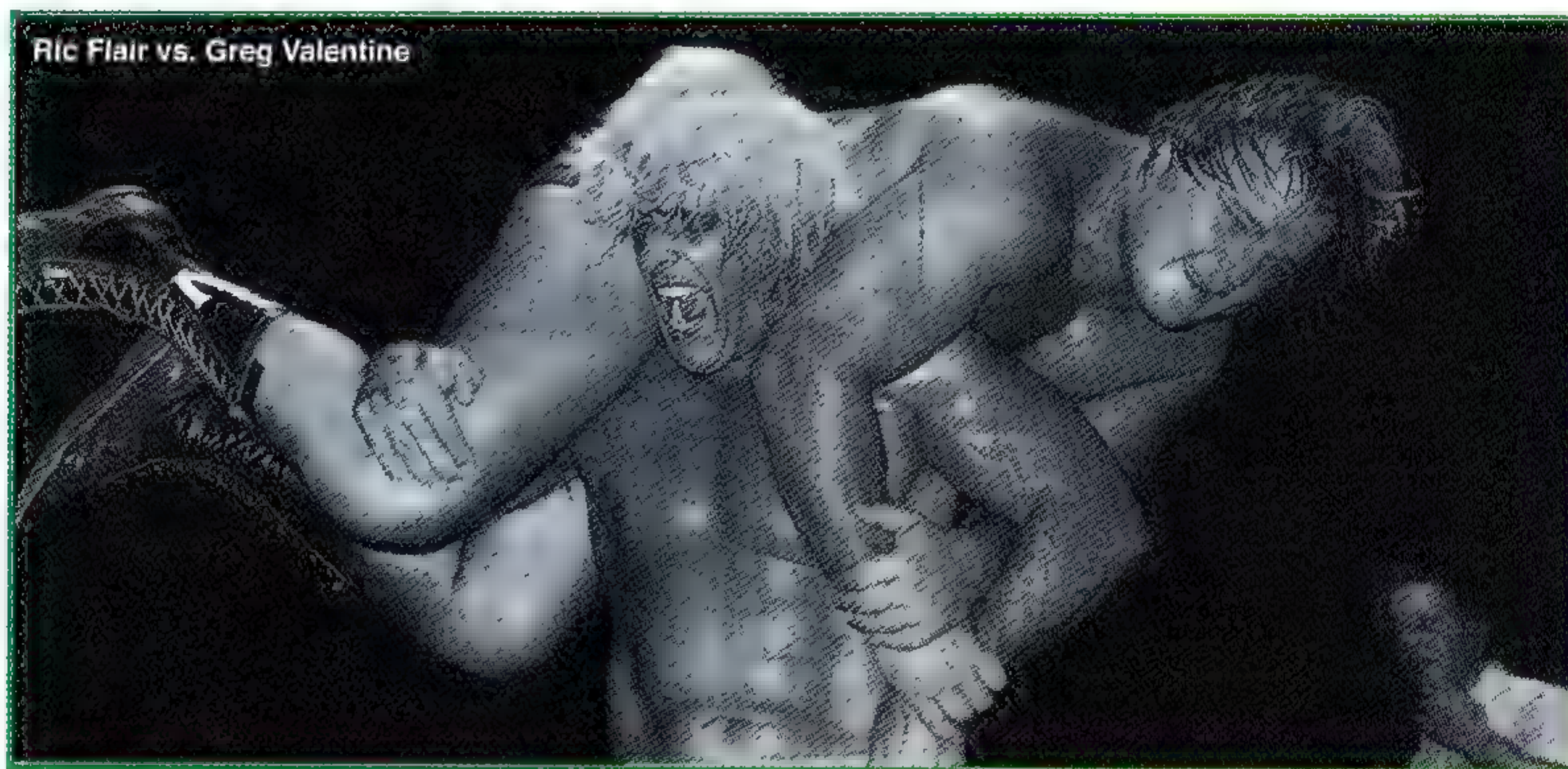
# 1980

Flair spent the early months of the year feuding with Rogers' stable, which included John Studd, Ken Patera, and Jimmy Snuka, the reigning U.S. champion. For months, Flair pursued Snuka, finally dispatching the "Superfly" on April 19. By this point, Rogers had been injured, and Gene Anderson had assumed control of his army. Flair scored impressive victories over Anderson and his men, but then he made the mistake of re-teaming with Valentine, who double-crossed him in a tag match and proved to be one of his toughest opponents ever. Valentine broke Flair's nose with Anderson's cane, defeated him for the U.S. title on July 26, and dubbed himself the "New 'Nature Boy.'"

The ex-tag champs engaged in a bloody feud that culminated on November 24, when Flair regained the title. Even as he won, lost, and regained the U.S. title, Flair made his first major run at Harley Race's NWA World championship. The two battled in St. Louis, Charlotte, and Toronto, and, in each match, Race narrowly escaped with his title intact.

At 31 years old, Flair was the headliner of one of the country's major territories and easily one of the top five ring technicians in the sport. To many observers, a world title reign seemed inevitable.

**Grade: A-**



Ric Flair vs. Greg Valentine

# 1981

Before he could continue his pursuit of Race, Flair had to deal with Roddy Piper. Flair and Piper both had a claim on the title "dirtiest player in the game," and this was evidenced in their wild matches. Piper scored the first big win in the feud, using a foreign object to end Flair's fifth U.S. championship reign on January 27. To preserve his title, Piper placed a bounty on Flair. On June 13, the Andersons nearly collected it, brutalizing Flair moments after he had beaten Ivan Koloff in a cage match.

In the weeks that followed, Flair retaliated by using a baseball bat against his enemies, a tactic that led to his suspension. Throughout the summer, the ever-resourceful "Nature Boy" regularly bought a ticket to JCP shows and emerged from the stands to attack

the Andersons and their allies. Ultimately, he was reinstated and got his revenge in a series of thrilling matches. Then, on September 17 in Kansas City, Missouri, Flair took on the NWA World champion Dusty Rhodes, who had unseated Race in June. Rhodes' knee, which had been injured a few nights earlier, gave out on him at a crucial moment, and Flair seized the advantage, winning the title. Flair was at long last truly "The Man," and he closed out the year with successful defenses that demonstrated his victory was no fluke.

**PWI Awards:** Wrestler of the Year; Match of the Year (vs. Dusty Rhodes, first runner-up)

**Grade: A+**



## Ric Flair's Career: A Report Card

# 1982

In his first full year as champion, Flair was constantly traveling. In January alone, he defended the title multiple times in seven NWA-affiliated promotions: JCP, Texas' World Class Wrestling, Georgia's GCW, Puerto Rico's WWC, Florida's CWF, the St. Louis Wrestling Club, and Kansas' Heart of America Wrestling. Everywhere he went, he faced the NWA's finest wrestlers. His most frequent challengers were the veterans Rhodes and McDaniel and the relative newcomers Tommy Rich of GCW (already an ex-World champion) and Kerry Von Erich of World Class. On July 4 in Atlanta, he had a memorable encounter against WWF World champion Bob Backlund, which ended in a double-countout.

Flair never failed to deliver excellent matches, but,

because of his arrogance and rulebreaking tactics, he mostly elicited boos from the fans. Even the JCP fans turned against him when he began another feud with Piper, who had become a beloved fan favorite. Flair wrestled many of his opponents to time-limit draws and sometimes lost via countout or disqualification, but he walked away from every match still the champion. Altogether, he had a remarkably successful year and made considerable strides in establishing himself as one of the great world champions.

*PWI Awards:* Wrestler of the Year (first runner-up); Match of the Year (vs. Bob Backlund, first runner-up)

**Grade: A**

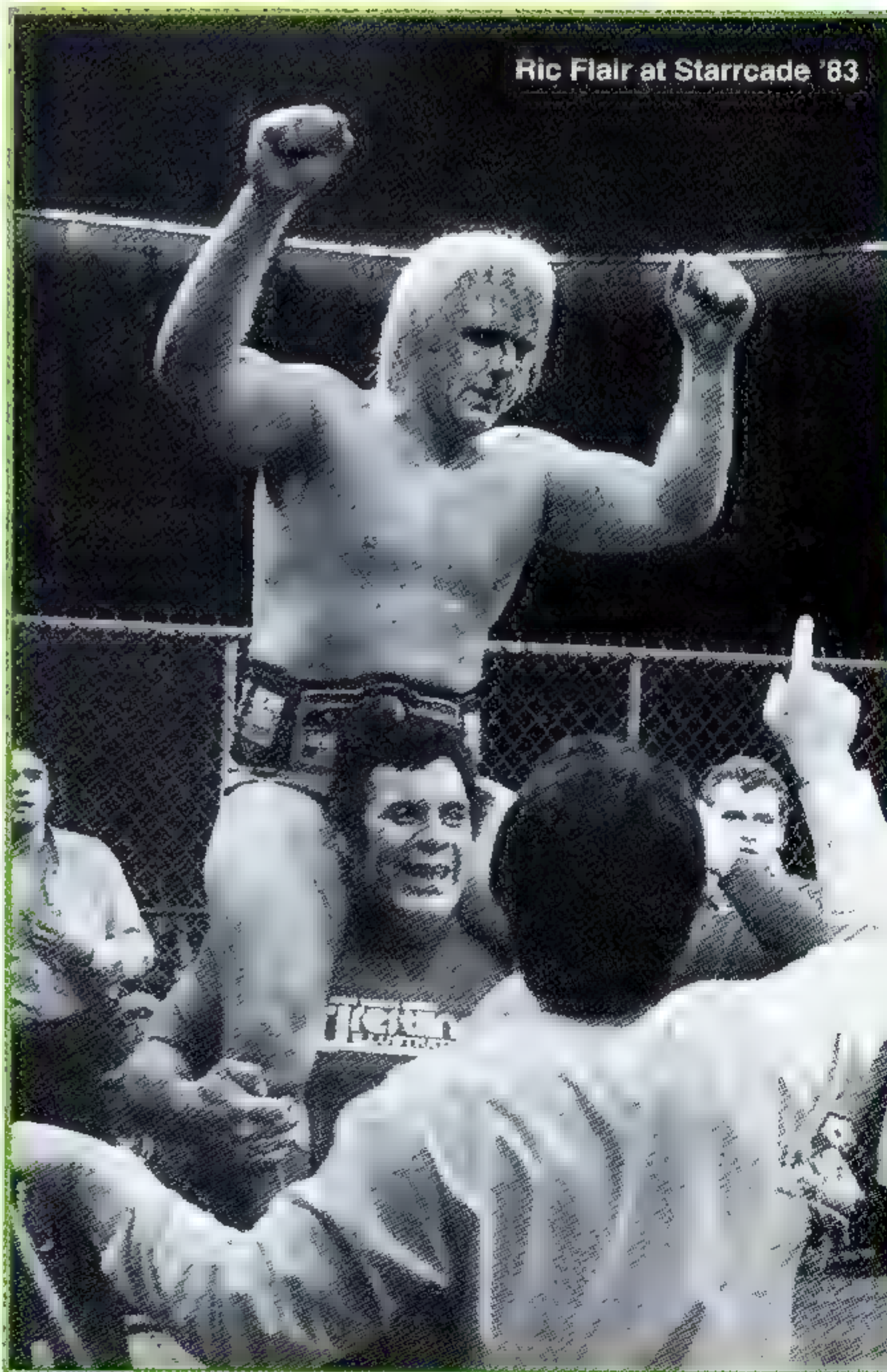
# 1983

As the year began, Flair was showing signs of burnout. He lost to Carlos Colon in a match for the WWC Universal title in San Juan on January 6. Three days later, in Santo Domingo, Jack Veneno pinned Flair in an NWA title match, but the belt was returned to Flair the next day on a technicality. Another technicality saved him on February 9 in Miami when The Midnight Rider (a masked Rhodes) beat him for the title and then refused to unmask, prompting the NWA to void the match. Flair's luck ran out on June 10 in a match against Race, who beat the "Nature Boy" for his seventh World title. Flair narrowly lost the initial set of rematches, but he did win back the sympathy of JCP fans after Race put a bounty on his head.

On August 31, Dick Slater and Bob Orton, Jr., Race's chief goons, broke Flair's neck with a piledriver on the concrete floor. Once again it appeared his career was over, and once again he returned. At the inaugural Starrcade, on November 22 in Greensboro, North Carolina, Flair pinned Race in an incredible cage match. Starrcade '83 stands as one of the most successful events in the long history of the NWA, and the main event match is still widely considered Flair's greatest victory. For the "Nature Boy," it was a year of struggle, perseverance, and ultimate triumph.

*PWI Award:* Match of the Year (vs. Harley Race)

**Grade: B+**



Ric Flair at Starrcade '83



## Ric Flair's Career: A Report Card

# 1984

In 1984, Flair's never-say-die attitude again proved to be one of his greatest assets. He dropped the belt to Race in Wellington, New Zealand, on March 21, and regained it two days later in Kallang, Singapore. Then, on May 6, in Irving, Texas, at World Class Wrestling's "Parade Of Champions," Kerry Von Erich dethroned Flair before more than 43,000 fans. But Von Erich's reign ended only 18 days later in Yokosuka City, Japan, when Flair reversed a roll-up and scored a pinfall victory.

The "Parade Of Champions" wasn't the only super-card Flair headlined in 1984. On May 29, he defeated Steamboat at the NWA's "Night Of Champions" in East Rutherford, New Jersey, and, on June 30, he lost a non-title match to Dusty Rhodes at the Lords of the

Ring event in Miami. Flair battled Rhodes again at Starrcade '84 on November 22, and, when the guest referee Joe Frazier stopped the fight due to a cut on Rhodes' head, Flair retained his title and collected a \$1-million purse.

Flair had many other impressive outings in 1984. In April, he wrestled three 60-minute draws against Steamboat over the course of five days, and, in the summer, he won a series of brutal Indian strap matches against McDaniel, who had become a rule-breaker.

*PWI Awards:* Wrestler of the Year; Match of the Year (vs. Kerry Von Erich)

**Grade: B+**

# 1985

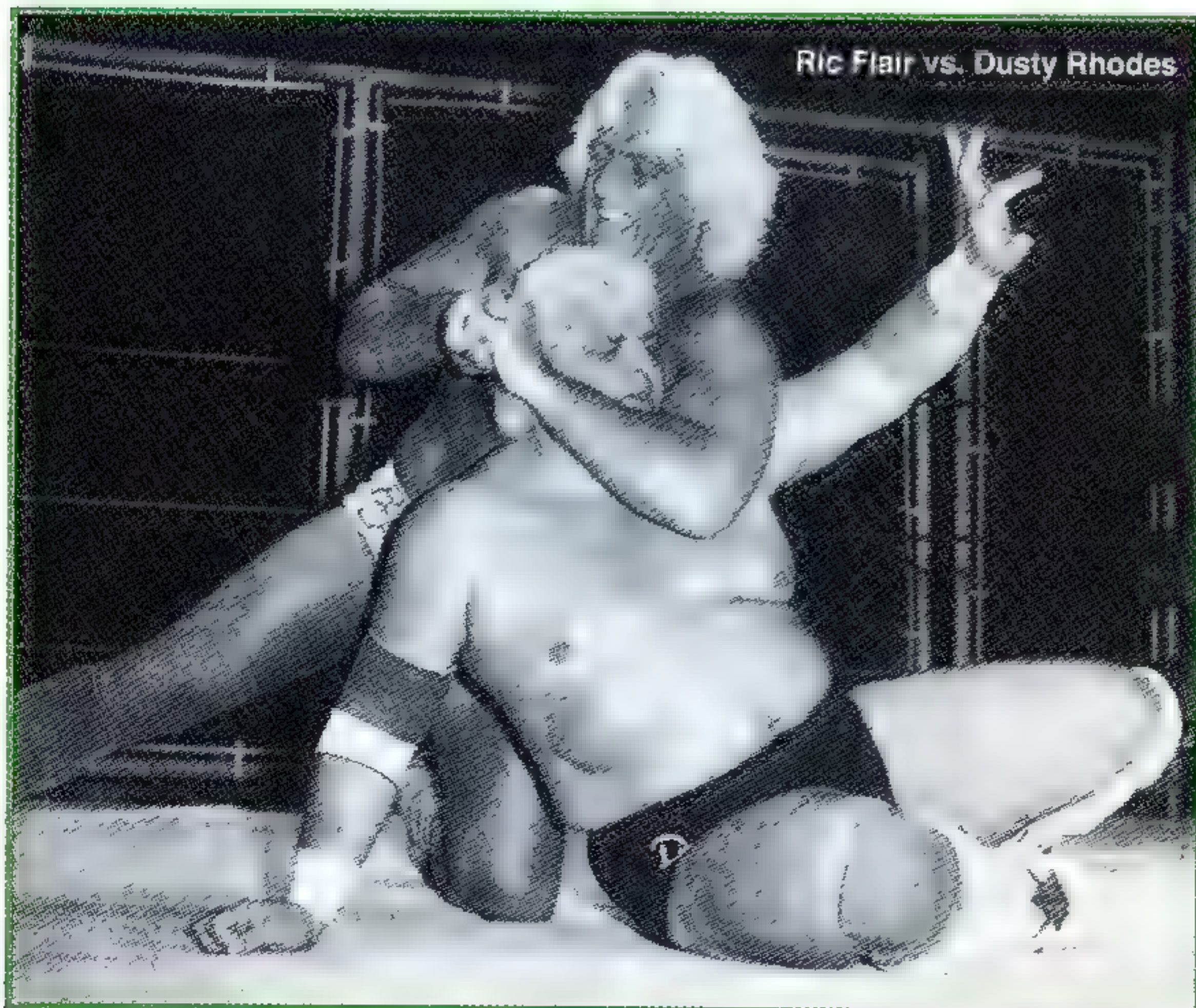
In early-1985, Flair continued to feud with McDaniel in both JCP and CWF and with the Von Erichs in World Class (on May 5, he wrestled Kevin Von Erich to a double-countout at the second "Parade Of Champions"). On February 24, Flair defeated Race on the first major card promoted by Pro Wrestling USA, a short-lived amalgam of the AWA and several NWA promotions.

By mid-year, Flair's main challenger was JCP's newest superstar, Nikita Koloff. On July 6, at the inaugural Great American Bash, Flair withstood Koloff's awesome power moves and scored what, to many, was an upset victory. A September 29 cage match against Koloff set the stage for a turning point in Flair's career.

After winning the match, Flair was attacked by Koloff and his allies. Rhodes rescued Flair, who repaid that kindness by helping Ole and Arn Anderson administer a savage beatdown on the "American Dream." As a result, Flair, who had been more of an anti-hero most of the year, was once again among the most reviled men in wrestling. Rhodes soon returned to action and pinned Flair on November 28 at Starrcade '85, but, because the assigned referee had (unbeknownst to the ringside officials) disqualified the champion before a second referee counted the pinfall, the NWA ruled that Flair was still the titleholder. It was a tumultuous year for Flair, but ultimately a highly successful one.

*PWI Awards:* Wrestler of the Year; Match of the Year (vs. Nikita Koloff, second runner-up)

**Grade: A+**



Ric Flair vs. Dusty Rhodes



## Ric Flair's Career: A Report Card

# 1986

This year witnessed the formation of the most notorious wrestling stable of the decade. In late-1985, the Andersons frequently saved Flair from defeat, and, by January, the three of them had taken on Tully Blanchard as their ally. Dubbed by Arn "The Four Horsemen," the quartet mastered the dressing room/parking lot ambush and had, by mid-year, hospitalized Rhodes, Magnum T. A., Sam Houston, and Ricky Morton.

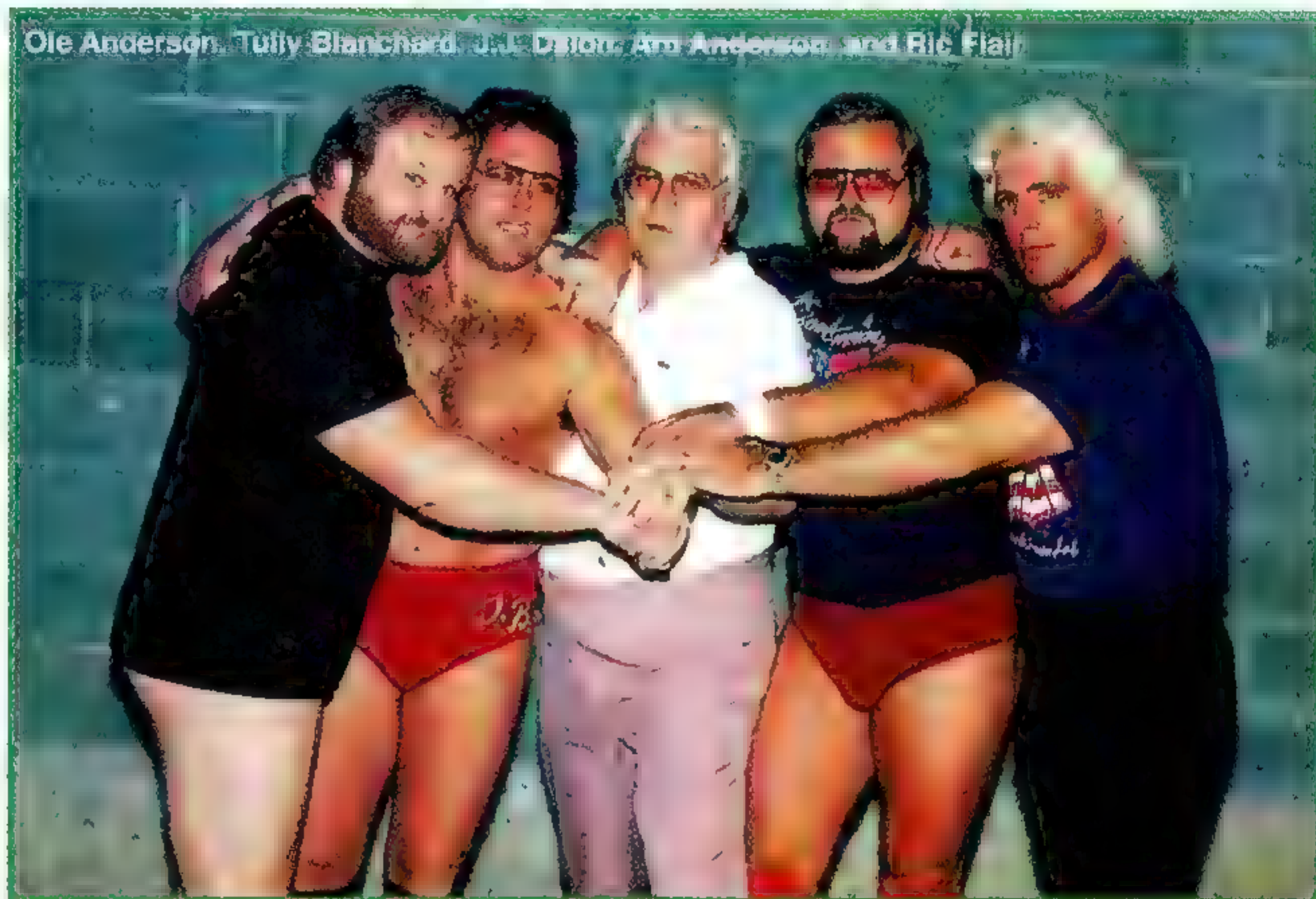
It was against Morton that Flair had his best matches in 1986. Morton was one-half of The Rock 'n' Roll Express and widely seen as a young Ric Flair. Ultimately, the champion's experience proved too much for Morton, who was among the many challengers Flair defeated over the course of the Great American Bash tour in July.

Flair himself tasted defeat on July 26, one of the final nights of the tour, when Rhodes pinned him in a classic cage match, ending his over two-year title reign. Rhodes' third World title reign barely lasted two weeks, for on August 9 in St. Louis, he fell victim to Flair's figure-four. On November 27 at

Starrcade '86, Flair had his final major title defense of the year, battling Nikita Koloff (now a fan favorite) to a double-disqualification. Another year ended, and Flair was still "The Man."

**PWI Awards:** Wrestler of the Year; Match of the Year (vs. Dusty Rhodes); Feud of the Year (vs. Dusty Rhodes, first runner-up); Most Hated (first runner-up)

**Grade: A**



Ole Anderson, Tully Blanchard, J.J. Dillon, Arn Anderson, and Ric Flair

# 1987

As the year began, Rhodes and Koloff continued to hotly pursue Flair's title, and the Horsemen continued to dominate JCP. In February, Flair began a series of brilliant matches against Barry Windham. The feud culminated with Flair retaining the title on April 11 at the "Jim Crockett Memorial Cup" tournament. For the 1987 Great American Bash tour, Flair and the Horsemen frequently took on (and invariably lost to) the team of Rhodes, Koloff, and The Road Warriors in double-cage "War Games" matches. On September 25, Flair suffered a more serious defeat when Ron Garvin captured the title in what was arguably the upset of the decade.

Flair regained the belt on November 26 at Starrcade '87, JCP's first pay-per-view. It was a tremendous match that affirmed Flair's status as a master ring technician, but his victory was diminished by

the fact that most fans never saw Garvin as a world championship-caliber wrestler.

Flair, it should be noted, was now essentially the World champion not of the NWA, but of JCP. By 1987, almost all of the old NWA territories had closed down or broken off from the Alliance. JCP was increasingly becoming a national promotion, but, because the NWA champion no longer traveled the territories taking on a new challenger virtually every night, the title had lost some of its mystique.

**PWI Awards:** Most Hated Wrestler of the Year (first runner-up); Match of the Year (vs. Ron Garvin, third runner-up); Feud of the Year (with The Four Horsemen vs. Superpowers & Road Warriors)

**Grade: B**



## Ric Flair's Career: A Report Card

# 1988

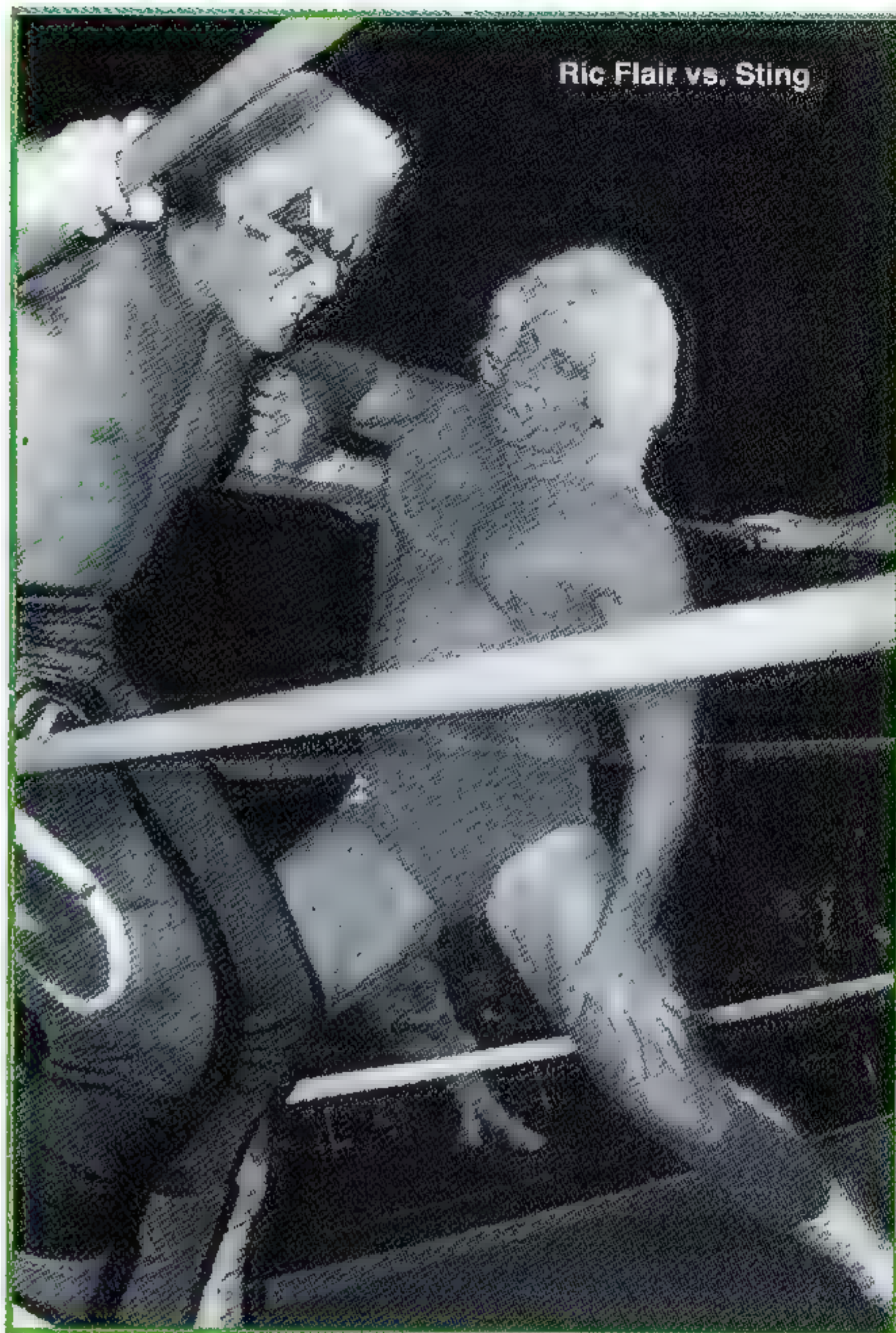
In 1988, as Crockett pursued an ill-fated promotional war against the WWF, Flair faced a new wave of challengers. The inaugural Clash of the Champions television special on March 27 saw him battle Sting to a 45-minute draw. The classic match catapulted the charismatic newcomer to superstardom, and he continued to challenge Flair throughout the year.

Flair's other major opponent in 1988 was Lex Luger, who had joined the Horsemen the previous year (having replaced Ole Anderson), but had fallen out with them in January. On July 10 at the Bash PPV, Flair retained the title against Luger when the referee stopped the match due to a cut above the challenger's eye. Although most fans believed it was only a matter of time until the young powerhouse took the belt, it was Flair who scored the pinfall in their excellent match at the Starrcade '88 PPV on December 26.

In the final months of 1988, Flair's world was shaken up twice: first, on September 10, when Tully Blanchard and Arn Anderson left for the WWF, and on November 2, when Crockett sold his failing company to Ted Turner. By year's end, Flair had turned back some significant threats to his title, but some questioned whether he could adjust to the dramatic changes that had befallen his promotion.

*PWI Awards:* Match of the Year (vs. Sting, first runner-up); Feud of the Year (vs. Lex Luger); Wrestler of the Year (third runner-up)

**Grade: B**



Ric Flair vs. Sting

# 1989

Though he turned 40 on February 25, Flair was showing no signs of slowing down. On January 6, Steamboat, who had spent the previous four years in the WWF, returned to the NWA, pinning Flair in a tag match. This victory set up a series of classic one-on-one encounters. Steamboat won the World title on February 20 at the Chi-Town Heat PPV, and then retained it in a 55-minute rematch at Clash of Champions VI on April 2. Finally, at May 7's Music City Showdown PPV, Flair regained the belt with a rolling cradle after a 30-minute clinic in pro wrestling. Each of these three matches has been called among the greatest of all-time.

Arguments have also been made for the matches Flair had later in the year against Terry Funk, who had brutally attacked him after his title victory. Flair,

once again a fan favorite, defeated Funk at the July 22 Great American Bash PPV. The feud raged on until November 15, when Flair made his rival submit in an unforgettable "I Quit" match at Clash IX. At Starrcade '89, on December 13, Flair lost to Sting in the finals of an ironman tournament. While the title hadn't been on the line, it was a sour note on which to end what was otherwise one of the best years of his career.

*PWI Awards:* Wrestler of the Year; Match of the Year (vs. Rick Steamboat); Feud of the Year (vs. Terry Funk); Most Popular (first runner-up); Comeback Wrestler of the Year (third runner-up)

**Grade: B+**



## Ric Flair's Career: A Report Card

# 1990

Reigning NWA World champion Ric Flair ushered in the '90s by instigating a feud that would follow him for not only the rest of the year, but for much of his career.

After winning over some fans by recruiting the popular Sting as the newest member of The Four Horsemen, Flair showed his true colors when he kicked WCW's franchise player out of the fold at a January Clash of the Champions. Later that night, when he tried to get his hands on Flair, who was competing in a six-man steel cage match, Sting blew out his knee climbing the cage.

While Sting sat on the sidelines, his close ally, Luger, feuded with Flair who beat him by countout at WrestleWar. Luger left the ring to save Sting from a Horsemen attack. Luger won a cage rematch at Capital Combat by disqualification when the Horsemen interfered.

With Sting healed, his epic showdown with Flair was set for the Great American Bash. In a classic contest, Sting beat Flair to capture the title and end the "Nature Boy's" 14-month reign.

Flair kept busy in the following months teaming with

Arn Anderson in matches against Doom. Then, at Starrcade, Sting defeated the masked and mysterious Black Scorpion, who had stalked him for months. At the end of the match, Sting unmasked the Scorpion to reveal none other than Flair.

**PWI Awards:** Feud of the Year (vs. Lex Luger); Match of the Year (vs. Sting, first runner-up); Most Hated (first runner-up)

**Grade: B**



# 1991

Flair began and ended one of the landmark years of his career year by making history. He started by winning his record eighth world title and ended it with a new employer, embroiled in a dream feud to trump all others.

In January, Flair recaptured the World title from Sting in East Rutherford, New Jersey. The win had further historic implications, as the winner was recognized as the first ever WCW World champion.

But by the spring, the WCW title was thrown into turmoil after a controversial finish to a match between Flair and Tatsumi Fujinami in Tokyo. However, Flair retained the title in a rematch at the first SuperBrawl.

Over the summer, Flair was primed for a title defense against Lex Luger at the Great American

Bash. But following a contract dispute, Flair left his home promotion of 15 years and took his gold belt with him.

Weeks later, Flair debuted as the "real" world champion in WWF and showed off the WCW belt. After a brief feud with Roddy Piper, Flair called out the one opponent that fans had clamored to see him take on for years, WWF World champion Hulk Hogan.

Flair came up short in a series of matches against Hogan at WWF live events, but the "Nature Boy" got a measure of satisfaction when he helped The Undertaker defeat Hogan for the title at Survivor Series. Also on that card, Flair was the sole survivor of a team that defeated another led by Piper.

**Grade: B+**



## Ric Flair's Career: A Report Card

# 1994

Back on top as WCW World champion, Flair had a busy year ahead—one that would include the final chapter in the greatest rivalry of his career, as well as the definitive match between he and Hulk Hogan.

But first, Flair turned back a number of challenges to his title, including a Thundercage rematch against Vader at SuperBrawl IV. He also beat Windham, who was picked as a mystery opponent by Col. Robert Parker, at Slamboree.

At the first Spring Stampede, Flair rekindled a feud with the man he would later call his greatest opponent—Steamboat. In another classic match, the two men wrestled to a no-contest when both men's shoulders were pinned to the mat simultaneously. The title was held up until Flair re-claimed it weeks later in a rematch on *WCW Saturday Night*.

In July, Flair achieved another milestone when

he defeated Sting at the Clash of the Champions to unify the WCW World title and Sting's WCW International championship.

That same summer, Flair's world changed when Hogan was signed by WCW and immediately challenged Flair for his title. In their major match on pay-per-view, Hogan beat Flair for the title in 21:50 at Bash at the Beach in Orlando on July 17.

The feud continued into October, when Flair, now accompanied by Sherri Martel, lost a cage retirement match against Hogan at Halloween Havoc.

**PWI Awards:** Wrestler of the Year (third runner-up); Match of the Year (vs. Hulk Hogan, second runner-up); Feud of the Year (vs. Hulk Hogan, first runner-up)

**Grade: B+**

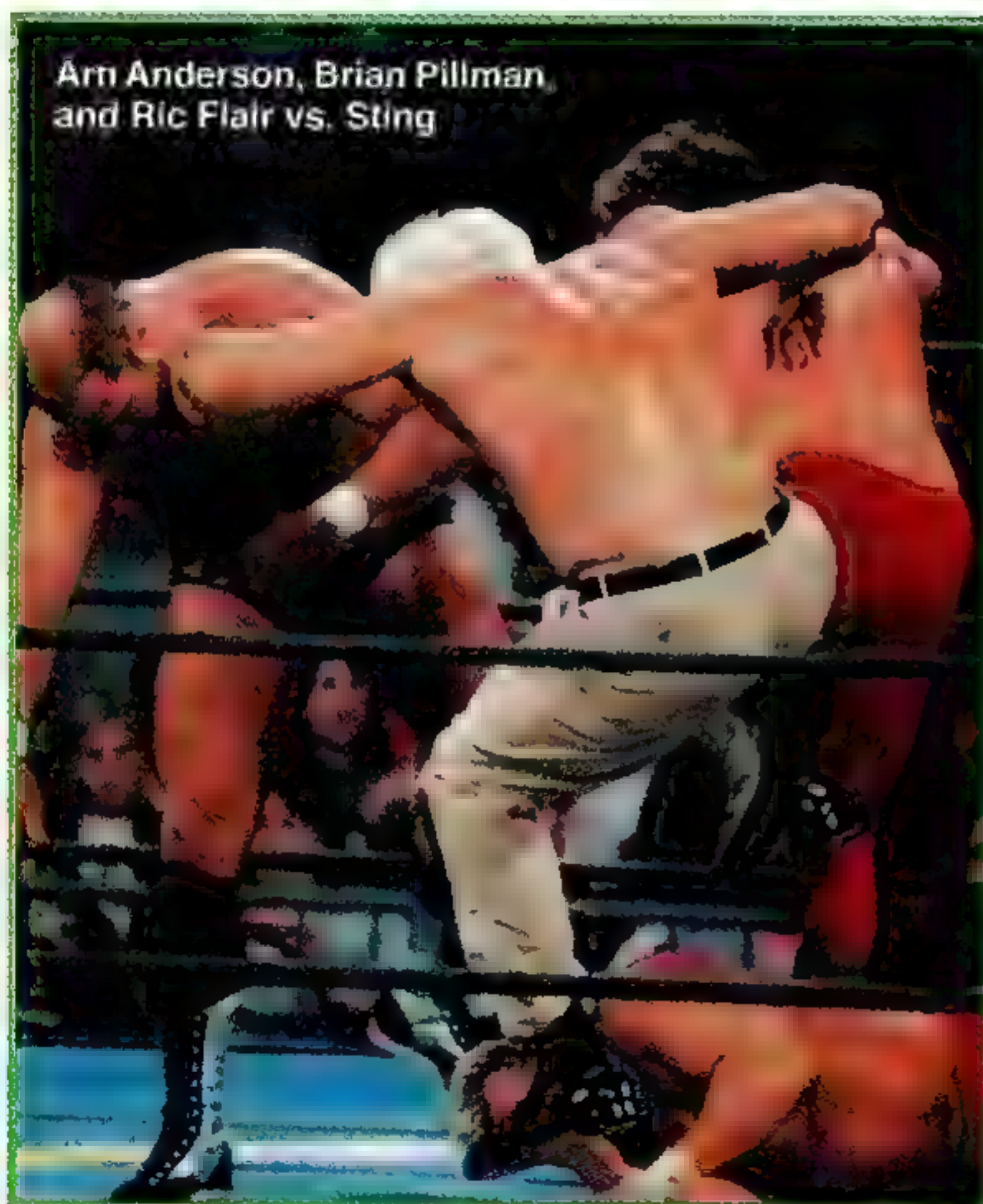
# 1995

Flair's "retirement" predictably didn't take, and, in 1995, he was back in WCW and setting more records.

Flair interfered in a match between Hogan and Vader at SuperBrawl and again at Uncensored where Hogan won a strap match against Vader by dragging Flair to all four corners of the ring.

In April, Flair again made history by competing in the main event of the largest attended wrestling event in history. Nearly 200,000 fans watched Antonio Inoki beat Flair in the main event of the first-ever pro wrestling event in North Korea.

In May, Flair resumed his intense rivalry with the newly arrived Savage. It became personal when Flair attacked Savage's father, Angelo Poffo. Flair beat Savage at the Great American Bash, but lost a lumberjack rematch at Bash at the Beach. Later that same night, Flair attacked Vader and was aided by Arn Anderson.



Arn Anderson, Brian Pillman, and Ric Flair vs. Sting

That led to a handicap match during which Vader took on Flair and Anderson. The two longtime friends bickered during the match, and a feud later developed between the former partners. Anderson beat Flair at Fall Brawl with the help of Brian Pillman.

Sting teamed with Flair to take on Anderson and Pillman at Halloween Havoc, but Flair ended up joining his opponents in attacking his partner. With the addition of Chris Benoit, a new incarnation of The Four Horsemen was born.

Sting beat Flair at World War III, but the "Nature Boy" got revenge when he won a triangle match involving Sting and Luger and was named number-one contender to Savage's recently

won WCW World title at Starrcade. Later that night, Flair beat Savage to win yet another world title.

**PWI Awards:** Feud of the Year (vs. Randy Savage, third runner-up)

**Grade: A**



## Ric Flair's Career: A Report Card

# 1996

Flair fought for more than just bragging rights or championship gold this year. He fought for the honor and the survival of WCW, as it was threatened by a dominant force by the name of the New World Order.

Early in the year, Flair lost his World title back to Randy Savage on *Nitro*, but won it back a few weeks later in a SuperBrawl cage match, where he enlisted the help of Savage's ex-wife, Elizabeth.

Flair lost the title to The Giant (Big Show) at an April *Nitro*, and weeks later was forced to team with his mortal enemy Savage through two rounds of the Battle Bowl Lethal Lottery.

The "Nature Boy" extended his entourage to include Woman and Debra McMichael, which led to a feud with Debra's husband, former NFL player and *Nitro* announcer Steve McMichael. Flair teamed with Arn Anderson to take on McMichael and another football star, Kevin Greene, at the Great American Bash. McMichael ended up turning against Greene and becoming the newest member of The Four Horsemen.

Flair beat Konnan to capture his first U.S. title at Bash of the Beach—the same night that Kevin Nash, Scott Hall, and Hogan joined forces to create the NWO.

As one of the leaders of the WCW locker room, Flair put all old rivalries aside to fight back the NWO's hostile takeover. He teamed with Anderson and longtime rivals Sting and

Luger in a losing effort against the NWO at a Fall Brawl War Games match.

Soon after, Flair suffered a torn rotator cuff at the hands of the NWO that forced him to relinquish the U.S. title.

*PWI* Awards: Wrestler of the Year (second runner-up); Feud of the Year (vs. Randy Savage, first runner-up)

**Grade: B-**



# 1997

With WCW's *Monday Nitro* drawing huge ratings, more wrestling fans saw Flair in action than ever before. Unfortunately, the year—the first since 1981 in which Flair did not wear a world title—was one filled with shortfalls and humiliation.

Flair's shoulder injury caused him to miss active competition in the first five months of the year. He returned to action in his hometown of Charlotte, North Carolina, at Slamboree, where he teamed with former foe Greene and Piper to defeat the NWO's Nash, Hall, and Syxx. Flair teamed with Piper again the next month in a tag team title shot against the Outsiders, but ended up abandoning "The Rowdy Scott." The ensuing rivalry culminated in Piper defeating Flair at Bash at the Beach.

The hard feelings between Flair and the New World

Order intensified when the NWO mocked Flair's best friend, Arn Anderson, after he delivered an emotional retirement speech.

At Fall Brawl, the Horsemen, with newest member Curt Hennig, and the NWO looked to settle the score in a War Games match. Flair's team lost after Hennig turned against the "Nature Boy" and revealed himself as the newest member of the NWO. Soon afterward, Flair disbanded The Four Horsemen.

Hennig went on to beat Flair both at Halloween Havoc and World War 3. After nearly 25 years of a prosperous career, "Nature Boy" Ric Flair finally fell into a slump.

*PWI* Awards: Most Popular (second runner-up); Comeback Wrestler of the Year (third runner-up)

**Grade: D**



## Ric Flair's Career: A Report Card

# 1998

In the ring, Flair's successes this year may have not been plentiful. But he did win back something that may have been missing throughout much of the previous year—his self-respect.

Flair began the year on a high note when he took on the newly arrived Bret "Hitman" Hart in a spectacular match at Souled Out. Despite losing, Flair was widely credited as a major reason for the pay-per-view's success.

But while fans still had tremendous respect for the "Nature Boy," Flair felt his employer did not. In April, WCW sued Flair for contract breach when he failed to show up at a scheduled *Nitro*. Flair maintained he was booked for the show at the last minute and had previously asked WCW President Eric Bischoff for the day off to attend his son Reid's amateur wrestling tournament.

The impasse between the two sides lasted until September, when Flair made a surprise return at a Greenville, North Carolina, *Nitro* during a reunion of The Four Horsemen. Before a raucous Flair Country crowd, an emotional "Nature Boy" gave an intense speech that blurred the lines between entertainment and reality. When Flair was interrupted by Bischoff, an impassioned Flair dared him, "Fire me! I'm already fired!"

The deeply personal grudge culminated at Starrcade, where Flair beat his boss. The following night, he did so again to win the "presidency" of WCW.

**PWI Awards:** Feud of the Year (vs. Eric Bischoff; second runner-up)

**Grade: C+**

# 1999

As the decade reached its end, so did one of the most dominant and influential factions in wrestling history, as The Four Horsemen rode for the final time. However, it was also the year that a second generation of Flairs entered the wrestling world.

At January's Souled Out pay-per-view, Flair teamed with his debuting son, David Flair, to defeat Windham and Hennig. Soon afterward, however, David shifted his allegiance to the NWO, and even helped Hogan defeat his father in a WCW title match.

But Flair's fortunes were reversed when he beat Hogan at a WCW Uncensored cage match, enabling him to capture his 14th world title and the WCW presidency from his rival Bischoff. He did so with some help from his newest ally, WCW referee Charles Robinson, who long idolized Flair and even took on the moniker "Lil' Naitch."

Flair lost the World title to "Diamond" Dallas Page in a four-way match at Spring Stampede, but he remained in the main-event scene, feuding with the likes of Piper in a storyline that saw Flair spend some time in a mental hospital. It was there that Flair recruited his latest valet, the bulked-up nurse, Aysa.

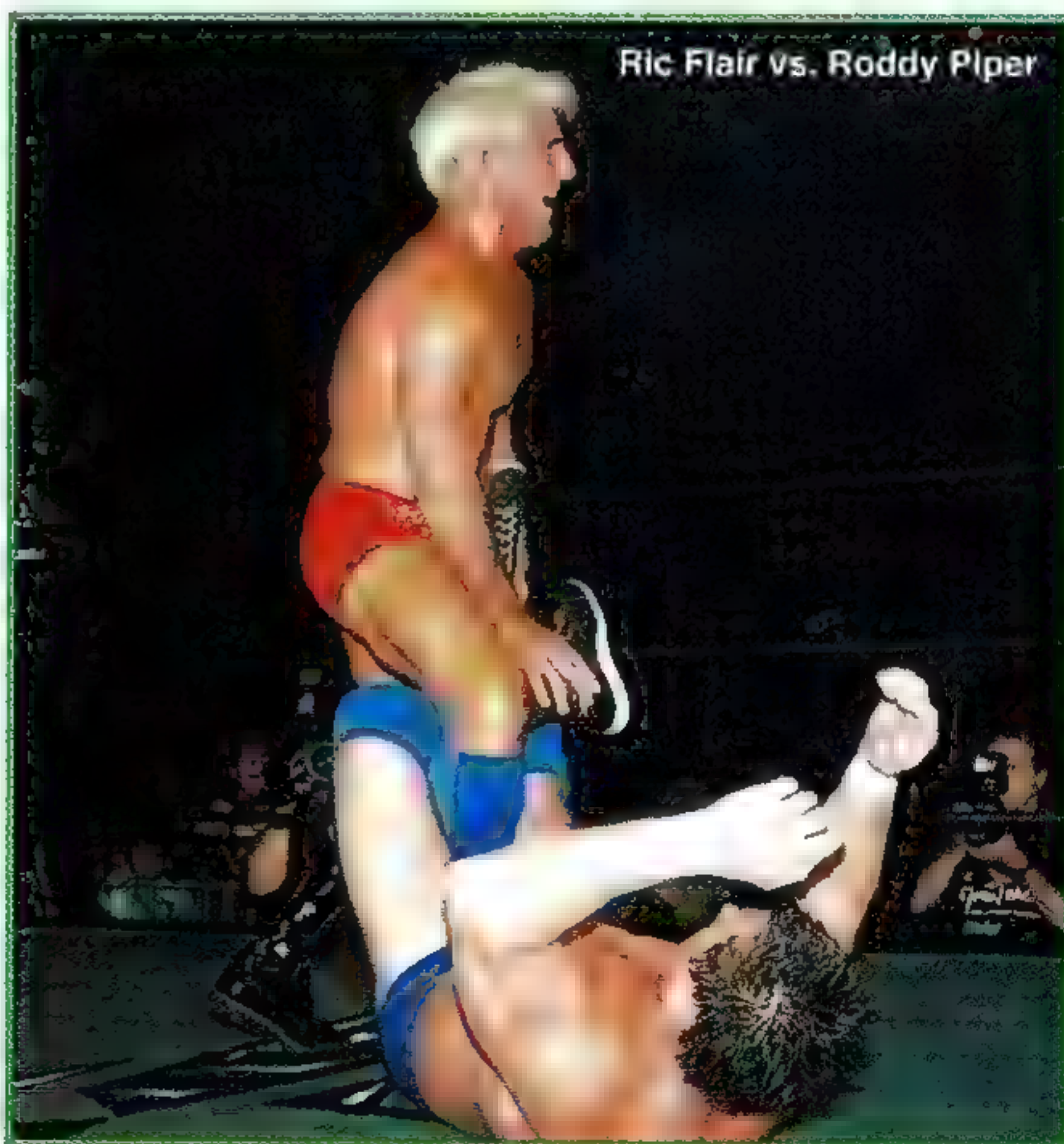
With the Horsemen doing his bidding, the WCW presidency in tow, and a referee in his back pocket, Flair found himself with unprecedented power. He made up with David, he even awarded him the U.S. title.

But before long, things started to fall apart for the "Nature Boy." Fed up Horsemen members Chris

Benoit and Dean Malenko left Flair—effectively disbanding the stable forever. Flair then lost the WCW presidency in a match against Sting in July.

**PWI Awards:** Feud of the Year (vs. Hulk Hogan, third runner-up)

**Grade: B**





## Ric Flair's Career: A Report Card

# 2000

A tumultuous year for WCW made for an equally tumultuous year for the "Nature Boy," who, despite winning the last two world titles of his career, would likely rather forget 2000 altogether.

As WCW's creative direction shifted several times, so did Flair's on-air role. Early in the year, Flair rekindled some of his classic feuds, including Terry Funk (in a Texas Death match at SuperBrawl) and Hogan, who beat Flair in a strap match at Uncensored. Shane Douglas, who had long harbored harsh feelings for Flair, also fought the "Nature Boy" in a couple of matches.

When Vince Russo returned to the creative team in the spring, WCW's World title picture was thrown into disarray, with nine different people holding the title over just six weeks. In the World title hot potato game, Flair got two very brief runs with the championship. He beat Jeff Jarrett for the title on a May edition of *Nitro*, only to be stripped of the title a week later by Russo, whose on-air rivalry with Flair reflected their real-life differences. A week later, Nash awarded the title to Flair, who lost it to Jarrett later that night.

Under Russo's direction, Flair sunk to a career low point that summer when he was embroiled in a feud against Russo and Flair's own son David. Russo defeated Flair in a cage match on *Nitro*, and teamed with David to defeat the "Nature Boy" and

his youngest son, Reid. As a stipulation of the match, Flair was forced to retire from wrestling, and also suffered the humiliation of having his trademark blond mane shaved off by Russo.

Flair returned in September, formed an alliance with his estranged son David, and was later named WCW's CEO. As the company's new on-air authority figure, the "retired" Flair kept a high profile, but, for the most part, stayed out of the ring.

**Grade: D**



# 2001

As WCW treaded water in its final months, the "Nature Boy" was once again called upon to draw the passion of fans as a top villain. But Flair's final storyline in WCW was shortlived—as was the company's future. By the end of 2001, fans saw a rejuvenated and reinvigorated "Nature Boy" return to a promotion where he first made a splash a decade earlier.

In January, then-WCW CEO Ric Flair returned to his rulebreaking ways with his formation of the Magnificent Seven—a stable of like-minded bad guys that dismantled many of WCW's heroes at the company's Sin pay-per-view. Flair did not see much ring action. Rather, he was the spokesman of the faction, which included Jarrett, Luger, Buff Bagwell, Road Warrior Animal, and the Steiner Brothers.

But, by March, the WCW storyline—and all others—was rendered moot when WCW lost its television deal, and the WWF bought the company. The last match of the final *Monday Nitro* fittingly featured Sting defeating his longtime rival Flair in an emotional bout.

After an eight-month absence from the wrestling universe, Flair resurfaced in November for the WWF in an intriguing new role. Stephanie McMahon and Shane McMahon had turned over their interests in WWF to Flair, much to the chagrin of Mr. McMahon. In a creatively satisfying position, and as part of a flourishing wrestling company, Flair appeared to be having as much fun as he had in years.

**Grade: C+**



## Ric Flair's Career: A Report Card

# 2002

After a nearly two-year hiatus, the "Nature Boy" returned to ring action and proved, in a pair of extraordinary pay-per-view performances, that he could still compete.

The power struggle over control of WWE between Flair and Mr. McMahon culminated in Flair's first match since returning to the company—a streetfight at the Royal Rumble. In a grueling and bloody brawl, Flair picked up the victory by forcing McMahon to submit to the figure-four leglock.

The following month, 'Taker attacked Arn Anderson and David Flair. The payoff was a show-stealing match between Flair and The Undertaker at WrestleMania X8 in Toronto. Despite a valiant effort, 'Taker kept his

'Mania winning streak intact by pinning Flair before more than 60,000 fans at SkyDome.

In the months that followed, Flair kept busy as the on-air owner and authority figure of the Raw brand. Flair ultimately relinquished his part-ownership of WWE in a no-holds-barred match against McMahon.

In the summer, Flair feuded with Chris Jericho—even picking up a submission victory at SummerSlam, and later with Rob Van Dam. Late in the year, he took on a role that he would keep for several years—that of the close confidant, partner, and sometimes-manager of Triple-H.

**Grade: B+**

# 2003

Flair took on a new, if somewhat familiar role—that of a member of a four-man wrestling faction with a penchant for championship gold and destruction.

After having a loose affiliation with these three men for months, Flair, Triple-H, Batista, and Randy Orton officially formed Evolution—a quartet of wrestling superstars representing the past, present, and future of the sport.

Flair took on the role of the elder statesman, and kept busy mostly by seconding Triple-H in his Raw World heavyweight championship defenses, including those against Booker T at WrestleMania XIX. Flair went to great lengths to help "The Game" hold on to his title through various defenses against Shawn Michaels, Nash, and Goldberg.

Flair also had some success in his own matches in 2003, including teaming with Triple-H and Chris Jericho to defeat Michaels, Nash, and Booker T at Backlash, and pinning Michaels, with some help from Orton, at Bad Blood.

The highlight of Flair's 2003 may have come in May, when he unsuccessfully challenged his protégé Triple-H for the Raw World title at a Greenville, South Carolina, Raw. After the match, the entire WWE locker room came to the ring for an impromptu and emotional celebration of Ric

Flair's 30th year as a wrestler.

Late in the year, Flair and Batista won a five-tandem "Tag Team Turmoil" match for the Raw World tag team championship. It was the first time Flair had worn wrestling gold in more than three years.

In 2003, an entire new generation of fans were also introduced to some of the greatest matches of Flair's career with the release of *The Ultimate Ric Flair Collection* DVD set. It would become one of the best-selling WWE video releases in history.

**Grade: B-**



Ric Flair oversees Evolution



## Ric Flair's Career: A Report Card

# 2004

Despite capturing a wrestling championship, winning a top match at WrestleMania, and keeping the schedule of a wrestler half his age, the professional highlight of Flair's 2004 may not have taken place in a ring, but rather in the pages of a book.

*To Be The Man*, Flair's long-awaited autobiography, was released in 2004, and was instantly considered one of the most important books on professional wrestling ever written. Drawing on his three decades in the business, Flair led readers on a fascinating, funny, and at times moving journey through his storied career.

But the story of the "Nature Boy" was far from over, and in 2004, Flair added a new chapter with another winning year. With *Evolution* at its peak, Flair and Batista defended their belts against the legendary team of the Dudley Boys in table match at the Royal

Rumble. After briefly dropping the straps to Rob Van Dam and Booker T, the "Nature Boy" and "The Animal" again won the titles in March, and then lost them to Benoit and Edge.

Also in March, Flair teamed with Batista and Randy Orton and defeated the reunited Rock 'n' Sock Connection of The Rock and Mick Foley at WrestleMania XX in Madison Square Garden—The Rock's last wrestling match ever.

But the glory days of *Evolution* would be short-lived. One night after Orton captured the Raw World heavyweight championship from Benoit at SummerSlam, Flair would join with Batista and Triple-H in double-crossing Orton and kicking him out of the faction. At Taboo Tuesday, Orton defeated Flair in a cage match.

Grade: B

# 2005

Although Flair would see as little in-ring action in 2005 as he had in a long time, he would end the year with a distinction that had also eluded him for a while—singles champion.

For the first several months of the year, Flair focused on his advisory role in *Evolution*, even as the stable seemed to be crumbling. Flair drew the coveted number-30 slot at the 30-man Royal Rumble match and lasted less than two minutes. The match was won by fellow *Evolution* member Batista. After "The Animal" severed his ties with the faction and beat Triple-H for the Raw World title at WrestleMania 21, Flair seconded "The Game" for several rematches. When Triple-H disappeared from the ring for several months, Flair was also largely invisible. However, at *Unforgiven*, Flair returned to the ring and scored an emotional victory over Carlito for the Intercontinental championship.

In October, Triple-H returned to the ring and teamed with Flair on Raw to beat Carlito and Chris Masters. But after the match, "The Game" turned against his mentor and brutally attacked him. Flair upset Triple-H in a Cyber Sunday cage match, but lost to "The Game" in a brutal "Last-Man-Standing" match at Survivor Series.

Grade: B





## 2006

With his days as Triple-H's second clearly in his rearview mirror, Intercontinental champ Flair returned his focus to his own career and reaped the rewards.

A bitter feud with Edge, in which the "Rated R Superstar" even mocked a run-in between Flair and North Carolina police, culminated with a match at New Year's Revolution. Flair won by disqualification. After a disappointing showing in the 30-man Royal Rumble, and dropping the I-C title to Shelton Benjamin in February, Flair gave an inspired performance as an unlikely contestant in the "Money In The Bank" ladder match at WrestleMania 22. Even after being taken away on a stretcher, a battered and bloodied Flair returned to the match, which was ultimately won by Van Dam.

After losing quickly to newcomer Umaga at Backlash, Flair became embroiled in a rivalry several years in the making—that with Foley. The feud hinged on real-life hard feelings between the two legends, who exchanged digs at each other in their respective autobiographies. The rhetoric-heavy rivalry featured Flair at his microphone-controlling best and culminated when Flair beat Foley in an "I Quit" match at SummerSlam.

Two months later, fans chose Piper to be Flair's partner as he took on Raw World tag team champions The Spirit Squad at Cyber Sunday. At 57 years old, Flair won what was his last title when he and "Hot Rod" upset the youthful champs. In November, Flair achieved another

distinction when he was the soul survivor in an eight-man Survivor Series elimination match against the Squad.

**Grade: A-**



## 2007

The first half of Ric Flair's 35th year in the sport gave no hint of what would be in store for him in the second half.

The early months of 2007 saw Flair embroiled in a rivalry with Carlito, who Flair accused of not showing the proper respect to him, nor to the wrestling industry. The adversarial relationship soon evolved into a partnership, with Flair taking Carlito under his wing.

In what many fans deemed the ultimate snub, Flair was left off of the main card at WrestleMania 23, but did get to wrestle before the 80,000 Detroit fans when he teamed with Carlito to win a dark match against Gregory Helms and Chavo Guerrero. Carlito turned against Flair weeks later, and their rivalry resumed.

In June, Flair was sent to the Smackdown brand, but after a brief feud with MVP, he disappeared from

TV altogether. Rumors spread that Flair, burnt out and frustrated with his marginalized role, had quit WWE. When he returned to TV after a three-month hiatus, many expected he would announce his retirement before a hometown crowd in Charlotte, North Carolina. Instead, Flair proclaimed that "he would never retire." But Mr. McMahon spoiled his party when he laid down a devastating ultimatum: The next time Flair lost a match, he would be forced to retire. Fighting for his career, Flair picked up a huge win over Raw World champion Randy Orton that same night, and kept winning for the rest of the year, including by count-out against protégé Triple-H at a December Raw from Greensboro, North Carolina.

**Grade: B-**



# Christian CAGE

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Christian Cage's stock dropped dramatically the moment Kurt Angle signed a TNA contract. Prior to that, Cage had bragging rights as being the guy who walked out of WWE and came to TNA, fully expecting to be treated as a conquering superstar. And, for a while, that's exactly what he was. During his WWE run, Cage was widely regarded as a second-tier star, and once Angle made his TNA debut, Cage dropped from the main events into feuds with Chris Harris, Sting, and Abyss. Right around the time Booker T debuted in TNA, Cage realized he needed to make a bold move and find a way to beat Angle or risk becoming permanently lost in the shuffle as TNA signed new, high-profile veterans. Cage found a new determination and wrestled

strong matches against Angle at Final Resolution and Against All Odds, only to have his former Coalition allies cost him the bout. He's wrestling as well as he ever has, but he has struggled to close the deal when the title is on the line. **GRADE: B**

**MARKETABILITY:** Cage has sold a respectable amount of "Instant Classic" and "Captain Charisma" T-shirts through the years, but he's still dogged by the perception of being a mid-card performer and not a true top-level guy. A decade spent on the mid-card will have that effect. Until Cage can score a clean win over Angle or Samoa Joe, he'll be a B-lister in the marketability department. **GRADE: B**

**REPERTOIRE:** There's no question the unprettier is an effective move, but we still think it puts Christian in unnecessary danger. To execute the move, he needs to turn his back on his opponent. All too often, the opponent frees an arm and then has a free shot at the back of Christian's head. Cage added the frog splash to his repertoire in honor of Eddie Guerrero, and that move has served him well. He lacks a notable submission finisher to call his own, but he has been known to use the figure-four, sharpshooter, and Indian deathlock on occasion. It wouldn't hurt to dust off those moves a bit more often. **GRADE: B**

**CAREER GROWTH:** This is one of those "glass half-full/half-empty" scenarios. On one hand, Cage broke away from his Christian Coalition and made a stand as his own man. On the other hand, he fell short in that campaign and has very few friends left in TNA. If he is serious about adhering to the rules, he needs to repair the damage he's made to his reputation since forming the Coalition, starting with making things right with Rhino. He needs to get his house in order if he wants to earn the respect he craves. **GRADE: B-**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Cage has a way of attracting the spotlight. He throws himself into every feud with gusto, and that keeps people talking about him. He's a valuable mid-level guy who has the potential to get back to the World title. **GRADE: B**



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling





Photo by Les South/TNA Wrestling



Ric

# FLAIR

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Ric Flair's greatest accomplishment over the past several months has been managing to find a way to survive with the looming threat that another loss will cost him his career. In what appears to be a farewell tour for the "Nature Boy," Flair has managed to eke out some big wins over young lions like MVP and Mr. Kennedy to build up for his big WrestleMania clash against Shawn Michaels. Flair is looking to go out with the style and showmanship that have characterized his career, and WrestleMania would be the ideal stage of Flair to take his final bow. **GRADE: B+**

**MARKETABILITY:** Very few wrestlers have the name recognition and marketing power of the "Nature Boy." Unfortunately, Flair is a shell of what he used to be. While nostalgia can be a powerful marketing force, the perception of Flair is that he has hung around too long and his appeal has waned somewhat as a result. Even Flair talks about having "one more great match left," and not making a serious last rush for a championship. With the book, the DVD anthology, and the

farewell tour, Flair has allowed himself to become over-exposed. **GRADE: B-**

**REPERTOIRE:** For more than two decades, Flair was the measuring stick for technical prowess and ring generalship. Flair still knows all the tricks of the trade, but the art of wrestling has become much more complex in recent years, thanks to the influence of lucha libre, puroresu, and mixed martial arts styles. Flair never kept up with the game. He has stuck entirely to the old stand-bys: the figure-four, the chops, the kneedrop, and the vertical suplex. It would be one thing if Flair were still in the same physical condition as he was in the 1980s, but his unwillingness to alter his style makes him a dinosaur in the modern era. All that being said, Flair has seen every move ever developed and knows how to counter most of them. **GRADE: B**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Where Flair's career goes from this point is anyone's guess. We would imagine he could have a lifetime role in WWE if he wants it—as a GM, manager, color commentator—you name it. Or, after

30-plus years on the road, he may well want to settle down, and no one could blame him for that. While his active career may be over, that doesn't mean he won't still be kissing the girls and making 'em cry in his golden years. **GRADE: B**

**OVERALL VALUE:** As an in-ring performer, Flair's value is purely as a nostalgia act, and nostalgia acts can get stale quickly. But as a personality, Flair is a living legend. He is a beloved icon in the business and will always have a very special place in the hearts of two generations of fans. **GRADE: B**



Photo by George Napolitano



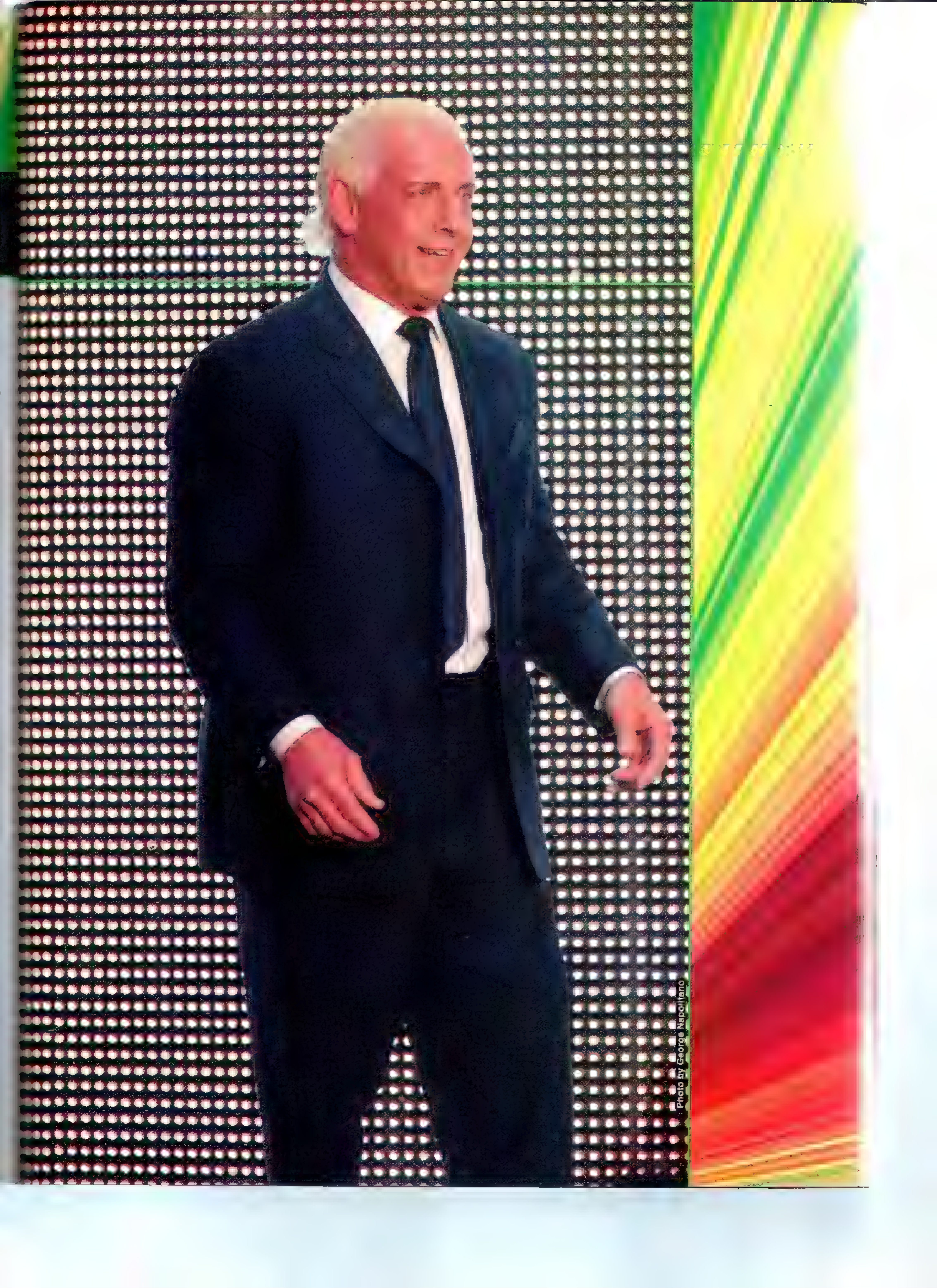


Photo by George Napolitano



# The Great

# KHALI

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Last year, we gave The Great Khali credit for amassing a very impressive winning streak and coming very close to beating John Cena for the Raw World title, but we still said he had a disappointing year. "Fair or unfair, we hold wrestling's giants to a higher standard than their shorter peers," we wrote. "Given Khali's incredible physical gifts, anything less than a world championship reign has to be considered a disappointment." Maybe Khali found inspiration in those words, because just weeks after the "PWI Report Cards" came out, he won the Smackdown World title and held it for two months. Khali has struggled a bit since losing the strap, but he won a World title and we have to give him his due: **GRADE: A**

**MARKETABILITY:** Giants used to be a major draw in wrestling, from Killer Kowalski to Haystacks Calhoun to Andre. The days of fans being enthralled by a wrestler's

sheer size have come and gone, however. Wrestling fans are much more discerning today than they were a generation ago. As a result, Khali has to work harder than most of the other big men who preceded him just to keep his spot in WWE, and he has the added impediment of being unable to speak English. Khali is a big star in his home country of India. He has also appeared in movies like *The Longest Yard* and the upcoming *Get Smart*. He's never going to become a household name like Andre did (at least, not in America), but he has a presence about him. A battle of the giants against The Big Show could be a big-money match. **GRADE: B+**

**REPERTOIRE:** Khali actually added a new move to his usual fare of tree slams, chops, and elbow strikes. His vise-like two-handed claw hold proved to be a formidable weapon, especially when his massive hands engulfed Rey Mysterio's head and caused Rey to bleed from the mouth. He'll never be called a ring technician, but adding a new move here and there can keep him dangerous and keep his opponents off-guard. **GRADE: C-**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Khali fell short in his quest to unseat Cena and win the Raw World title, but recovered admirably by quickly capturing the Smackdown championship after being sent to the blue brand in the draft lottery. Since losing that title, though, Khali has floundered. He got tied up in an ill-advised feud with Finlay and quickly submitted to Undertaker in the "Elimination Chamber" at No Way Out. Ranjin Singh may speak his language. For some better advice Khali should really consider signing an experienced manager. **GRADE: C**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Khali may not be on his way to a Hall of Fame career, but a win over the giant can still do wonders for a wrestler's career. A clean win over Khali can instantly propel a wrestler into world title contention, and Khali himself is a credible challenger and champion. As far as role players go, there are none bigger than Khali. **GRADE: B**



Craig Ambrosio/WWE/Courtesy of CW Network





Rich Freeda/WWE/Courtesy of CW Network



# Jeff

# HARDY

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Right up until mid-March, the Jeff Hardy story had all the trappings of a Cinderella story. Just a few years back, he was nearly booed out of the arena when he appeared in Ring of Honor after being released by WWE. He re-established himself in TNA and seemed to be on the verge of winning that World title when his erratic behavior and missed events forced the company to release him. Though the critics predicted his WWE return would be a failure, Hardy emerged as one of the Raw brand's most popular stars while John Cena was out with his injury, and he came oh-so-close to beating Randy Orton for the title at the Royal Rumble. But then, with WrestleMania just weeks away, Hardy was suspended for 60 days for violating the WWE's Wellness Policy. Whenever he's on the verge of a breakout, Hardy's behavior brings him crashing right back down. **GRADE: B**

**MARKETABILITY:** Even though he's been wrestling for 15 years, Hardy still comes across as being young and exciting, which is one of the major reasons for his

popularity. He also has a unique look and highspot-based offense that helps him stand out. Even a lot of people who didn't consider themselves to be Jeff Hardy fans found themselves pulling for him at the Rumble because his rise to the main event was such an endearing story. Hardy lost a little luster when he lost that match, and he may lose some more when he returns from his suspension, but he has a proven record of being a big merchandise seller with a passionate fan base. That's why he's survived in the business this long. **GRADE: B+**

**REPERTOIRE:** The most important thing Hardy learned from his matches against Triple-H in December was the art of pacing. Whenever Hardy found himself in trouble in a match, he used to look for the first opportunity to use the ropes to his advantage and try for a desperate whisper in the wind or another move that used the ropes for momentum. Triple-H was smart enough to keep matches in the center of the ring and negate that strategy and Hardy had to learn other counters, such as the sit-out jawbreaker or quick go-behinds. He became a better wrestler because he re-learned the fundamentals. That makes Hardy much less predictable and much harder to beat. Now if only he'd learn some submission moves. **GRADE: B**

**CAREER GROWTH:** We would have given him an A+ had we issued this report card before he was suspended, but his violation of the Wellness Policy is alarming. One more violation would result in his termination. Once again, it looks like poor decisions are about to derail a promising career. **GRADE: B-**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Hardy proved he can be a ratings draw as a challenger at the main-event level, but is he responsible enough to remain at that level? Would he no-show a pay-per-view like he did in TNA? It's still hard to tell if the rewards from having him on the roster outweigh the risks. **GRADE: B**



Photo by George Napolitano





Photo by George Napolitano



# Bob & Cody HOLLY RHODES

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** You've got to be tough to earn the respect of Bob Holly. Cody Rhodes proved his worth after suffering through several beatings at Holly's hands and never backing down. Obviously, Cody was listening when his daddy told him "it ain't the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog." For Holly, the Raw World tag team title represents his first championship since his hardcore title days of 2000. For Cody, it represents starting his career on a high note and starting to add his own chapter to the Rhodes family legacy. They are two wrestlers at opposite ends of their careers, and the tag championship is an ideal place for both of them. **GRADE: A**

**MARKETABILITY:** As a team, Holly and Rhodes have an interesting dynamic with the hot-tempered veteran acting as a mentor for the unsteady second-generation newcomer. There's an underlying tension there as Holly has always been something of a loose cannon. There's always a chance he might blow up at Rhodes for making a youthful mistake and perhaps turn against his partner. And that has to be playing through Rhodes' mind, too. That anything-can-happen feel creates fan

interest in the team, even though both Rhodes and Holly are relatively bland wrestlers. Holly has never been marketable, and it's going to take Rhodes some time to get out from Dusty's shadow before he develops his own persona. They are far more marketable as a team than they are as individuals. **GRADE: B-**

**REPERTOIRE:** Holly's style and move set haven't changed much since he dropped the Sparky Plugg persona and got back to stiff, power-based wrestling. He added a little more of an emphasis on his submission holds (particularly his full-nelson) during his 2004 feud with Brock Lesnar, which gave him a new dimension and made him a more dangerous competitor, but he has largely stopped using submission moves for some reason. Rhodes had some great double-team moves when he partnered with Shawn Spears in OVW, but he doesn't seem to have the comfort level to use them with Holly yet. In the meantime, he's trying to find his own style by putting his own twist on moves popularized by his father and his brother, Dustin. Rhodes' repertoire is expanding while Holly's is contracting. **GRADE: C+**



Photo by George Napolitano

**CAREER GROWTH:** It seems as if Holly has a resurgence every two or three years, then suffers an injury and fades away. He's on an upswing now, and Rhodes is content to just ride the momentum for all it's worth. Their team may be a marriage of convenience, but it's worked out well for both of them. **GRADE: B+**

**OVERALL VALUE:** A tag team is only as good as the level of opposition it has to face. With so few quality teams on Raw, the championship has been badly devalued. Holly is a veteran journeyman who could slip back to *Heat* next week. Rhodes, however, may be in position for a terrific singles career. Rhodes is the MVP of this team and the Raw tag division. **GRADE: B**





Photo by George Napolitano



# John Bradshaw

## WAYNED

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** When JBL retired from active competition last year, he claimed he was hanging up the boots and 10-gallon hat because of painful back injuries he had accumulated through the years. Retirement made sense at the time. He had capped off a 15-year career with an improbable Smackdown World title run and had an opportunity to go out on a high note. Apparently, calling matches alongside Michael Cole didn't give him the wrestling fix he needed. His excuses for attacking Chris Jericho at Armageddon were flimsy. He saw that the Raw roster was decimated by injuries, and he orchestrated a high-profile feud to take advantage of that fact. JBL has gone from retirement to a featured feud with Finlay and a big match at WrestleMania. **GRADE: B+**

**MARKETABILITY:** JBL isn't the kind of guy who sells a lot of merchandise, but he does have crossover appeal. He makes regular appearances as a panelist on the Fox News Channel, hosts his own conservative radio talk show, and wrote a book on financial plan-

ning. He may often be outrageous and controversial, but he's also an excellent ambassador for pro wrestling in the mainstream media. He discredits the long-established perception of wrestlers as being grunting Neanderthals. **GRADE: B**

**REPERTOIRE:** You're never going to see JBL try a moonsault or try some crazy suicide dive to the floor. Heck, when he was announcing on Smackdown, he used to admit that his wrestling style was akin to a drunken hippo. Bradshaw is, always was, and always will be a brawler. His clothesline from hell is still vicious, and he's not afraid to trade the heavy lumber with punches and kicks. But JBL still has yet to fully shake off his ring rust. He's slower, less agile, and his back is still suspect. At his best, JBL is a serviceable brawler. He's not at his best yet. **GRADE: C**

**CAREER GROWTH:** When JBL failed to win the "Elimination Chamber" match at No Way Out to get a world title shot at WrestleMania, he set his sights on a new target. After savagely attacking Hornswoggle, JBL informed Vince McMahon that Hornswoggle was not his son. It seems that JBL is angling to get into McMahon's good graces and perhaps get an advisory position with McMahon or perhaps to become the GM of the Raw brand. In any case, he didn't come out of retirement to be relegated to *Heat*. He has something up his sleeve, and we should expect plenty more high-profile matches out of him over the course of the next year. **GRADE: A**

**OVERALL VALUE:** JBL is a great talker and is completely convincing in his role as the pompous ass who believes he's bigger than the sport. He's a veteran who can deliver entertaining matches and is a credible main-eventer. His retirement didn't exactly send shockwaves through the sport, and his return didn't usher in a new era on Raw. He's a good rule-breaker who'll give you a good, stiff match. There's nothing wrong with that. **GRADE: B**



Photo by George Napolitano





Photo by George Napolitano



# Jay

# LETHAL

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Over the course of the past 12 months, Jay Lethal has cleanly pinned Kurt Angle, won the X division championship twice, and actually saved the entire X division from extinction. He also got to first base with So Cal Val, though it did take him several months to work up the nerve to ask her out. In any case, "Black Machismo" has had a banner year and has distinguished himself as one of the most important figures in the history of the X division. **GRADE: A**

**MARKETABILITY:** The "Black Machismo" thing was funny for the first couple of months, but it has really run its course. In fact, the Randy Savage obsession might actually be holding Lethal back. Despite his accomplishments in the ring, he's still widely perceived as a comedy act. He would be much more marketable if he established his own character, rather than trying to be cool by doing dated "Macho Man" impressions. **GRADE: C**

**REPERTOIRE:** Again, the Savage fixation is killing Lethal. Before he became "Black Machismo," Lethal's arsenal included a stunning release dragon suplex and his Lethal combination (STO backbreaker into a reverse STO). Now, he's using basic flying ax handles, bodyslams, and an elbow off the top rope. When pressed, Lethal will bring out his signature moves, but he seems to make it a point to try to incorporate as many as Savage's trademarked spots into his matches as he can. He's choosing to limit himself because he wants to be more entertaining. He fails to realize that the innovative and impressive moves he used to use were 10 times more entertaining than the Savage shtick. Enough already! **GRADE: C+**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Lethal is ready to take his game to the next level. With a win over Angle under his belt and a successful feud against Team 3D, he's on a hot streak. He has the confidence that comes only with major victories. It's time for him to break out of his comfort zone and leave the X division. He needs to stop the "Machismo" silliness and put out a challenge to Angle, Samoa Joe, or A.J. Styles. The worst thing for his career at this juncture is to get pigeonholed as a great X division wrestler. He doesn't need any qualifiers ... he's just a great wrestler. **GRADE: B+**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Ultimately, Lethal's value to TNA will be determined by how he plays the cards in front of him. If he perpetuates this "Black Machismo" character and limits himself to matches against X division opponents, he's going to be the centerpiece of that division. He'll be an entertaining lower-card guy who can occasionally pull off a big upset. But if he gambles and tests himself against the big boys, he can be a breakout star over the next 12 months ... and possibly even World champion. **GRADE: B**



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling





Photo by Len South/TNA Wrestling



# Nigel

# McGUINNESS

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Nigel McGuinness finally vanquished Takeshi Morishima to claim the Ring of Honor heavyweight title, but at what cost? McGuinness has been plagued by injuries since winning the championship, including a concussion that may be causing some lingering difficulties. After collecting wins over Morishima, Bryan Danielson, and Austin Aries, McGuinness has established himself as the top star in ROH, but his accumulated injuries, together with his high-impact style, could leave him susceptible to an upset by rising young contenders like Erick Stevens, Delirious, or Claudio Castagnoli. **GRADE: B+**

**MARKETABILITY:** McGuinness is blessed with size that is a rarity in Ring of Honor. He comes across as a major star and a legitimate heavyweight in a promotion filled with wrestlers standing less than six feet tall and weighing in at less than 200 pounds. The fans rallied behind him in his chase of Morishima, but he has alienated a lot of them since, stemming from a perception that he is exploiting his concussion to duck

challengers like Danielson. He may be the top star in ROH right now, but he's still not accepted as the best wrestler in the promotion. He also needs a lot of work on his promos, as he often comes across as self-conscious and unsure of himself, despite all his bravado.

**GRADE: C**

**REPERTOIRE:** McGuinness has a unique ability to be sticky and then be explosive. By "sticky," we mean he has an ability to grab a wrist and quickly go into an armbar while simultaneously closing the distance between himself and his opponent and moving to a headlock. He has a very fluid progression of moves and does not let go of one body part until he has a firm grasp on another. Essentially, he sticks to his opponent at all times. But once he has forced an opponent to expend energy and free himself and create that much-needed space between them, McGuinness explodes with European uppercuts and clotheslines. He is an adept in-fighter and mid-range fighter. His weakness is his lateral mobility and somewhat weak defensive grappling ability. **GRADE: B+**

**CAREER GROWTH:** McGuinness is at a crossroads. He has made it just about as far as he can go in ROH. Now, does he follow in the footsteps of Samoa Joe and C.M. Punk and try his hand in a larger promotion like WWE or TNA, or does he stay loyal to ROH like Danielson? We'd like to see McGuinness take that next step and see if he can extend his success against a more varied level of competition. He can always come back to ROH when the fans realize what they had. **GRADE: B**

**OVERALL VALUE:** McGuinness is a very tough and talented wrestler, but Ring of Honor just isn't the right fit for him, despite his success. The ROH fans haven't fully embraced him, and his style might be more suited to TNA. **GRADE: B**



Photo by Joe Zano







# Shawn

# MICHAELS

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Shawn Michaels has always claimed to be "The Showstopper," but there's a big difference between "stopping the show" and being the guy celebrating at the end of the show with the World title around your waist. In 2007, Michaels challenged for the Raw World title on four pay-per-views. He came up short each time (though he did win a non-title bout against John Cena on Raw in a match that was voted Match of the Year by *PWI* readers). He got yet another chance in the "Elimination Chamber" at this year's No Way Out, only to be pinned by Triple-H. Hall of Fame career or not, a guy with that many blemishes on his record really shouldn't be so proud of himself. **GRADE: C**

**MARKETABILITY:** Just a few years ago, Michaels turned against Hulk Hogan, and was back in the fans' good graces barely a few weeks later. Michaels is so beloved that it's hard to image any scenario where he would get booed. People show their feelings toward HBK with applause, ratings, and at the souvenir stand. **GRADE: A**

**REPERTOIRE:** Maybe it's because of all those losses, but Michaels recently unveiled an inverted figure-four leglock, which has added an entirely new element to his game. Michaels is at his best when he's most severely tested. That's when he digs deeper into his back of tricks and brings out his versions of the sharp-shooter and the anklelock. All too often, he relies on basic slams, a flying forearm, an elbow off the top, and a little sweet chin music—all of which are very easy to counter by alert opponents. Randy Orton proved as much when he countered Michaels' vaunted superkick with a basic punch to Michaels' unprotected groin. It's no wonder Michaels went back to the drawing board for the new leglock. **GRADE: B**

**CAREER GROWTH:** About a decade after a serious back injury forced him into an early retirement, Michaels has come back to become one of the most consistently electrifying wrestlers in WWE. He is still a definite title threat, though he's less of a threat today than he was a few short years ago. He is still perfectly capable of stealing the show, but he appears

just about ready to become more of a novelty competitor than a legitimate World title contender. He has helped wrestlers like Orton and Mr. Kennedy take their game to a new level, which is also something his mentor, Ric Flair, was known for doing. Once Flair steps aside, Michaels is a suitable candidate to take his place as the grizzled veteran every young kid will be gunning for to make a name for himself. At this stage of his career, that's a good role for Michaels. **GRADE: B**

**OVERALL VALUE:** It may seem sacrilegious that we're looking at Michaels to pass the torch, especially when he has come so close to regaining championship form, but Michaels is much more valuable as a star-maker than as a star. Win or lose, he'll always have his Clique of fans. **GRADE: B**



Photo by George Napolitano





Photo by George Napolitano



# The & John MIZ MORRISON

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** The self-proclaimed "Chick Magnet" and the "Shaman Of Sexy" make for unlikely tag team champions, but they have somehow managed to survive with their belts, despite making regular defenses on both Smackdown and ECW. Morrison and Miz are finding their groove, which is impressive considering how they didn't get along at all just a few months back. For Morrison, the Smackdown World tag team title is a slight step down from the ECW heavyweight title. For Miz, the tag title is the greatest accomplishment of his career. **GRADE: A-**

**MARKETABILITY:** Morrison and Miz may be arrogant jerks, but they have a certain star power. Morrison has the look, though his whole wannabe Jim Morrison persona often comes off as way too hollow and rehearsed. It takes a lot more than good hair conditioner and a slow motion entrance to be "The Lizard King," Johnny. Miz still has fans from his realty TV days. Together, Morrison and Miz are young, photogenic, and have attitude to spare. If they can improve

their promo skills, they might be able to develop into the next New Age Outlaws ... but they still have a lot of work to do. **GRADE: C+**

**REPERTOIRE:** Morrison has put a lot of time and effort into building a well-rounded offense. He isn't afraid to try some unconventional—and potentially risky—moves. If they work, he incorporates them into his move set. If they don't, he tries something new. It's a refreshing attitude to see in a time when so many wrestlers stick to just a handful of signature moves. Mizanin is still the junior member of the team. His reality check neckbreaker is effective, but he's progressing slowly. All too often he simply charges an opponent and tries to flail out with a knee or clothesline without fully considering his options, and that tends to get him into trouble. He should really focus on developing ways to work on an opponent's legs and keep them grounded so Morrison can capitalize with his variety of corkscrew moonsaults. **GRADE: B**

**CAREER GROWTH:** The Miz may have gained more out of this team's success than Morrison has. As a two-time Intercontinental champion and a former ECW champion, Morrison was already an up-and-coming star. This team, while successful, may have stalled some of his momentum. We could imagine Morrison in a featured feud against Shawn Michaels, Jeff Hardy, or Chris Jericho, where he could possibly steal the show with a tremendous match. As for Miz, most critics didn't think he'd survive in ECW, let alone win a championship. For Miz, the success of this team has given him the credibility he always lacked. **GRADE: B**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Miz and Morrison deserve credit for doing double-duty and keeping tag team wrestling alive and strong on two brands simultaneously. That schedule will probably be their downfall in the end, and then Morrison will have to decide if he wants to keep the team alive or go back to the singles ranks. Either way, they met the challenge and both men are likely to win more championships in the future. **GRADE: B**



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# ODB

**GOAL ACHIEVMENT:** ODB is the first woman ever to go directly from Ohio Valley Wrestling to TNA instead of WWE. According to her, that was because a WWE official told her she didn't have "the right look" to be a WWE Diva. Instead of quitting, she became even more determined to make it in wrestling and to prove that unnamed official wrong. Now she's one of the most popular Knockouts in TNA and a top contender for Awesome Kong's championship. **GRADE: A**

**MARKETABILITY:** ODB definitely stands out from the crowd. As she always likes to remind us, she's not just another pretty face. Edge may call himself the "Rated R Superstar," but some of ODB's behavior (i.e.

her drinking, chest-grabbing, and her dirty dozen maneuver) should at least have a PG-13 rating. Look around the Impact Zone and you're bound to see dozens of fans proudly sporting their ODB T-shirts. She gets one of the loudest reactions of anyone on the card, too. And the best part is that her ring skills and mike skills are still improving, so she's only going to get better. **GRADE: B+**

**REPERTOIRE:** Alas, this is the category where ODB struggles. She can knock the wind out of most women with her chops. Her clotheslines are frighteningly hard, and she has the physical strength to slam just about anyone. But beyond those few moves (and an occasional spear), ODB doesn't have much to offer. Her one-dimensional attack is a liability against more technically gifted competitors like Gail Kim, Miss Jackie, and Roxxi Laveaux. **GRADE: C**

**CAREER GROWTH:** So far, ODB's rise to the top has been nothing short of meteoric. She still hasn't found a way to defeat Kong, however, and her on-again, off-again alliance with Kim is sidetracking her. Fortunately, ODB doesn't care much about making friends. She's the kind of woman who's just going to find a way to "Git 'er done." She hasn't won the championship yet, but it should be in the cards for her this year. **GRADE: B+**

**OVERALL VALUE:** ODB is the X-factor in the Knockouts division. Kong is the monster. Kim plays the David to Kong's Goliath. Angelina Love, Velvet Skye, and Laveaux are the pretty faces (not that the others aren't). ODB is the shot of adrenaline straight to the heart. She's like a slightly more feminine version of The Crusher. She drinks from her flask, cracks a few skulls, makes a few jokes, and then finds the after-party. While she's not very refined, she is one of the most adaptable ladies in the TNA locker room. She's a fan favorite now, but she could easily become a rulebreaker without changing her style one bit. No other woman has the combination of power and energy that ODB brings to the table. If she were to leave TNA, she would be sorely missed. **GRADE: B**



Photo by George Tahinos





Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



# Travis

# TOMKO

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Just when it looked like Travis Tomko was on the verge of a career breakthrough, he swerved us all and went back to being just another one of Kurt Angle's lackeys. There's no question that Tomko has established a lot in TNA, and he has vastly exceeded the expectations that were set when he debuted as Christian Cage's enforcer. He's a tag team champion and a main-event caliber performer. Still, had he played his cards just a little differently, he might just have been able to beat Angle for the TNA World championship. **GRADE: B**

**MARKETABILITY:** Tomko showed a surprising amount of charisma as the lone wolf-type character who refused to choose between the Christian Coalition and the Angle Alliance. But the momentum and fan base

he had been building seemed to evaporate overnight when he ultimately sided with Angle at Against All Odds. The potential for Tomko to become a very marketable attraction is there, but not when he's relegated to playing Angle's hip-ornament in the dysfunctional Angle Alliance. **GRADE: B**

**REPERTOIRE:** Tomko's version of the Hercules cutter (a neckbreaker out of a torture rack backbreaker) is awesome, but it's a move that requires him to wear down his opponent considerably in order to hoist him into position. Tomko usually uses simple clotheslines, chinlocks, and neck wrenches to soften his opponents for his collection of slams and chokeslams. It can be a methodical and plodding strategy that often leaves him open for very quick counter-attacks and stick-and-move comebacks. He may want to consider introducing American fans to the impressive senton bomb he uses in New Japan just to add a new dimension to his game. **GRADE: C+**

**CAREER GROWTH:** It has been a breakthrough year for Tomko as he's gone from being a big and bland peripheral character to being a vital part of the top heel clique in TNA. Tomko deserves credit for turning to Japan to reinvigorate his career after being released from WWE in 2006. He became a big star in Japan and gained the confidence and swagger that he had been lacking. All that work is finally paying off for the big man. Two years ago, it would have been unthinkable to imagine Tomko wearing a singles world title belt around his waist. Now that doesn't seem too outrageous at all. **GRADE: A**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Since its inception, TNA has been stung by its inability to "create" its own stars. The company too often relies on wrestlers who made names for themselves in WWE or WCW. While Tomko competed in WWE, he never really broke through there. He is exactly what TNA has been looking for—a unique super heavyweight with a world of upside potential that TNA can claim as being a diamond in the rough that they discovered and allowed to shine. He's not at the pinnacle, but he's definitely on the rise. **GRADE: B**

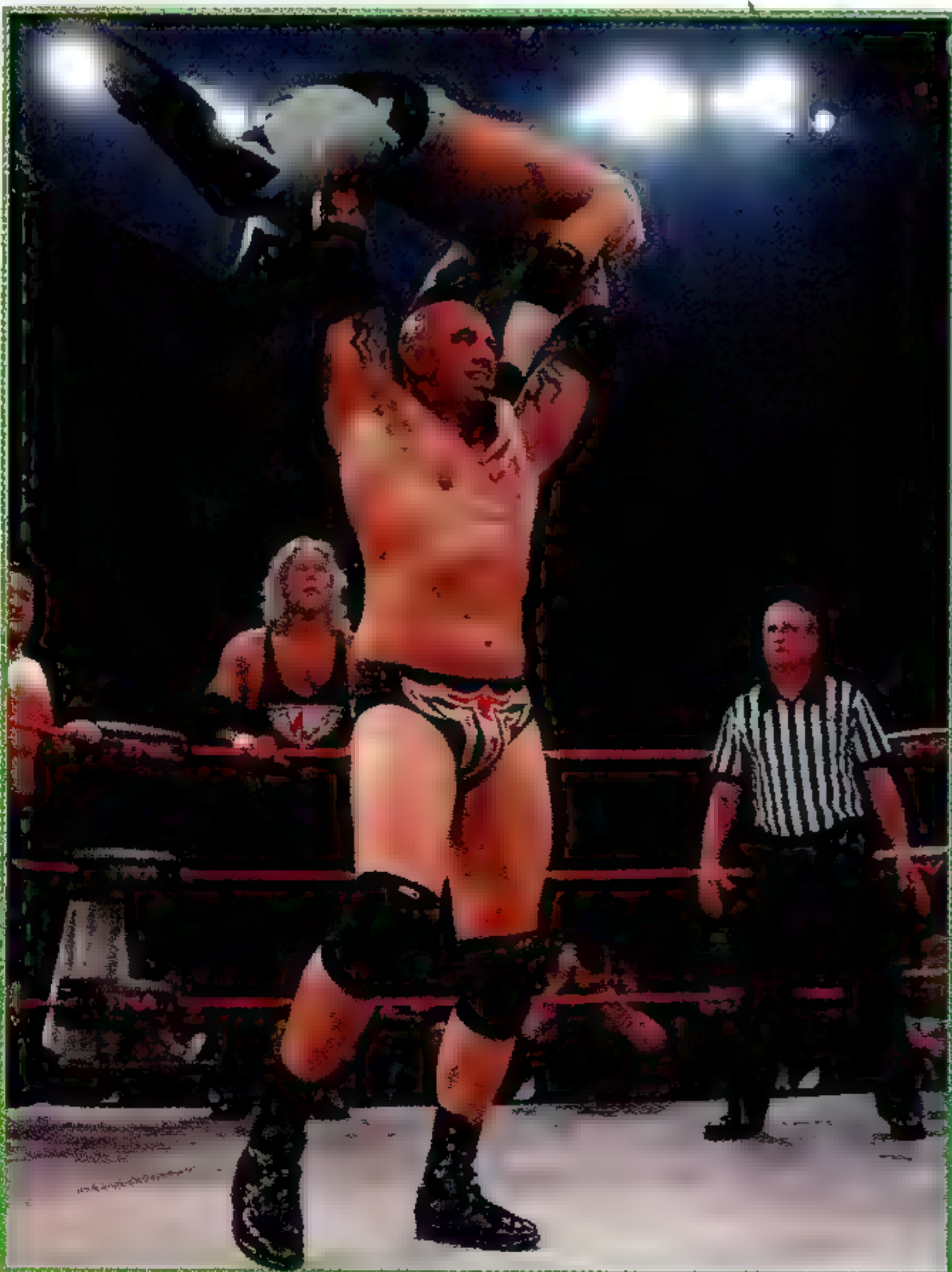
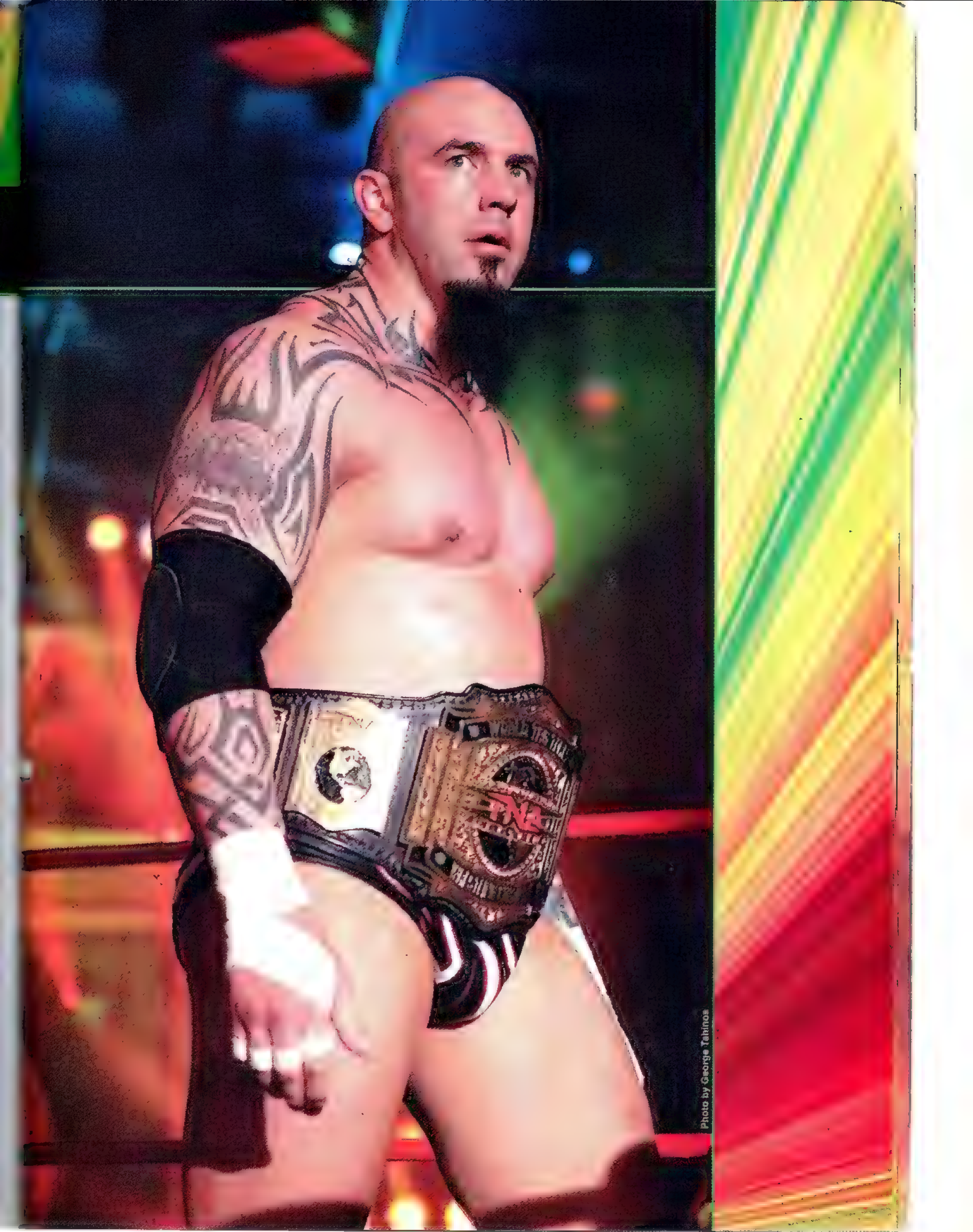


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling







# Petey

# WILLIAMS

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Petey Williams had been treading water since Jim Cornette forced Team Canada to disband, but he has successfully reinvented himself as "Maple Leaf Muscle," the Mini Me to Scott Steiner's "Big Poppa Pump." The new persona gave Williams the boost he needed and has returned him to the top of the X division. The bigger challenge will be *breaking out* of the X division. Even when Williams had that briefcase he thought contained a guaranteed World title shot, he still wasn't being taken seriously as a World title contender. Re-establishing himself as a force in the X division is a step in the right direction, but Williams also needs to wrestle—and beat—larger opponents to remind people he can achieve more than an occasional X division title. **GRADE: B+**

**MARKETABILITY:** The Canadian destroyer is one of the most impressive, and frequently copied, moves of

this decade, and Williams still gets credit as the guy who popularized it. But that's old news by this point. Williams should do a bit more to play up his "Maple Leaf Muscle" nickname. The promotional tie-ins are endless. Who wouldn't want "Petey Williams' Maple Syrup Muscle" for their pancakes? Okay, maybe not. But he should at least get a new T-shirt made. What self-respecting Canadian wouldn't buy a "Maple Leaf Muscle" T-shirt? There's potential there. **GRADE: C**

**REPERTOIRE:** Williams is a skilled mat wrestler, but you wouldn't know it since he's usually wrestling very fast-paced, highspot-filled X division matches or trying to overcome a size disadvantage against a larger opponent. When Williams has an opportunity to control the pace of a match, he's much more likely to win the bout, particularly when he's able to utilize his hammerlock camel clutch variation or his dragon sleeper. He's got the moves, but he's frequently so concerned about trying to hit the destroyer that he rushes himself and gets caught as a result. **GRADE: B-**

**CAREER GROWTH:** This association with Steiner has done wonders for Williams' career. We hate to say it, but there was a time there when we expected to hear that Williams was getting released from TNA. He had fallen far out of the rankings and was barely getting any face time on TV. When Steiner shook Petey's hand as a sign of respect, it was a huge boost for Williams. "Maple Leaf Muscle" may not show the same killer instinct he showed during his five-month X division title reign of 2004–05, but he's more relevant than he has been in months. It will be interesting to see if he ever gets that World title shot he covets so much. **GRADE: A**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Along with Jay Lethal, the Motor City Machine Guns, and Sonjay Dutt, Williams might be one of the men who can bring the X division back to prominence after it was nearly destroyed by Team 3D. Williams can be a cornerstone of the division and his association with Steiner makes things intriguing. He's a wrestler to watch over the coming months. **GRADE: B**



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



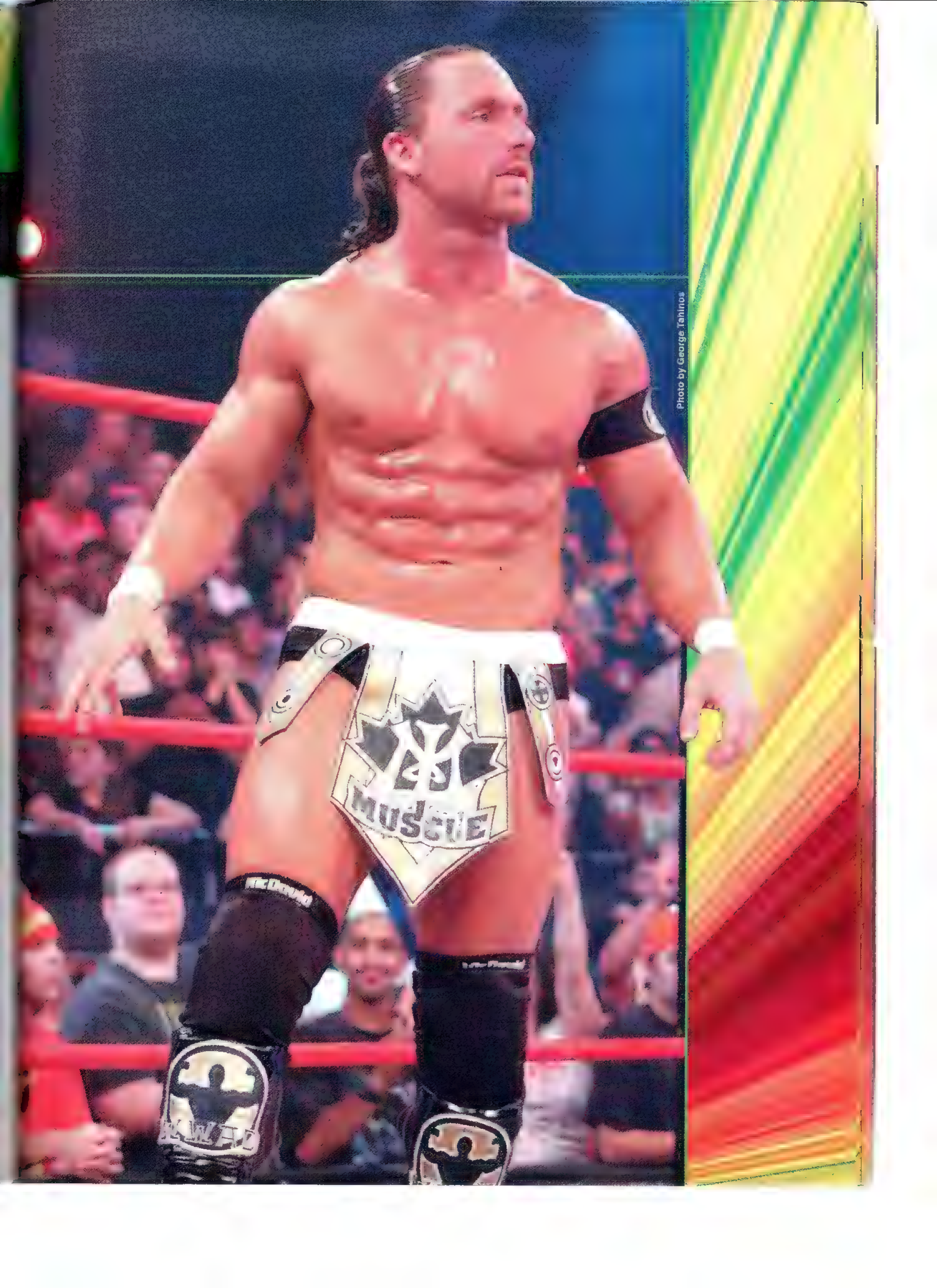


Photo by George Tahinos



# Austin ARIES

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** The former Austin Starr doesn't get a whole lot of publicity, but he's one of the most fascinating wrestlers in the sport. He was the man who ended Samoa Joe's vaunted ROH title run back in 2004 and gave C.M. Punk all he could handle in 2005. While those two have gone on to superstardom, Aries walked out of TNA to go back to Ring of Honor. His match against Nigel McGuinness at Rising Above was a Match of the Year contender, even though Aries failed to reclaim the gold. You can't question his talent, and you have to admire his independence, but his small size and nonconformist streak may ultimately prevent him from having the success his talents would ultimately bring him. **GRADE: B-**

**MARKETABILITY:** Aries showed a lot of promise when he became Austin Starr in TNA and incorporated elements of Randy Savage, Jesse Ventura, and Adrian Adonis into his style, but he is much more comfortable

letting his wrestling skill speak for itself. ROH is the perfect promotion for him in that regard, and he has become a favorite on the independent circuit. He's a top star in ROH, but he could be much more marketable if he was plying his trade in the much more visible TNA. **GRADE: C**

**REPERTOIRE:** Do a YouTube search on Austin Aries and you'll find fan-produced video compilations of his best moves. When a wrestler has so many breathtaking moves in his arsenal that fans take it upon themselves to try to showcase them, you've got something special. And when that highlight reel has had more than 3,600 views, you've got something dynamic. Aries' Death Valley bomb on the ring apron is particularly impressive because he executes a traditional Death Valley driver on the apron, directly on top of the steel beams that support the ring where there is virtually no "give" in the canvas. His brainbuster has a certain snap that can jerk an opponent's neck as well as drop them on his head, and his 450 splash is arguably the crispest, most effective splash in wrestling. But at barely 5'9" and 200 pounds dripping wet and after a big meal, Aries is almost always giving up a very significant power advantage, which mitigates some of his effectiveness. **GRADE: A-**

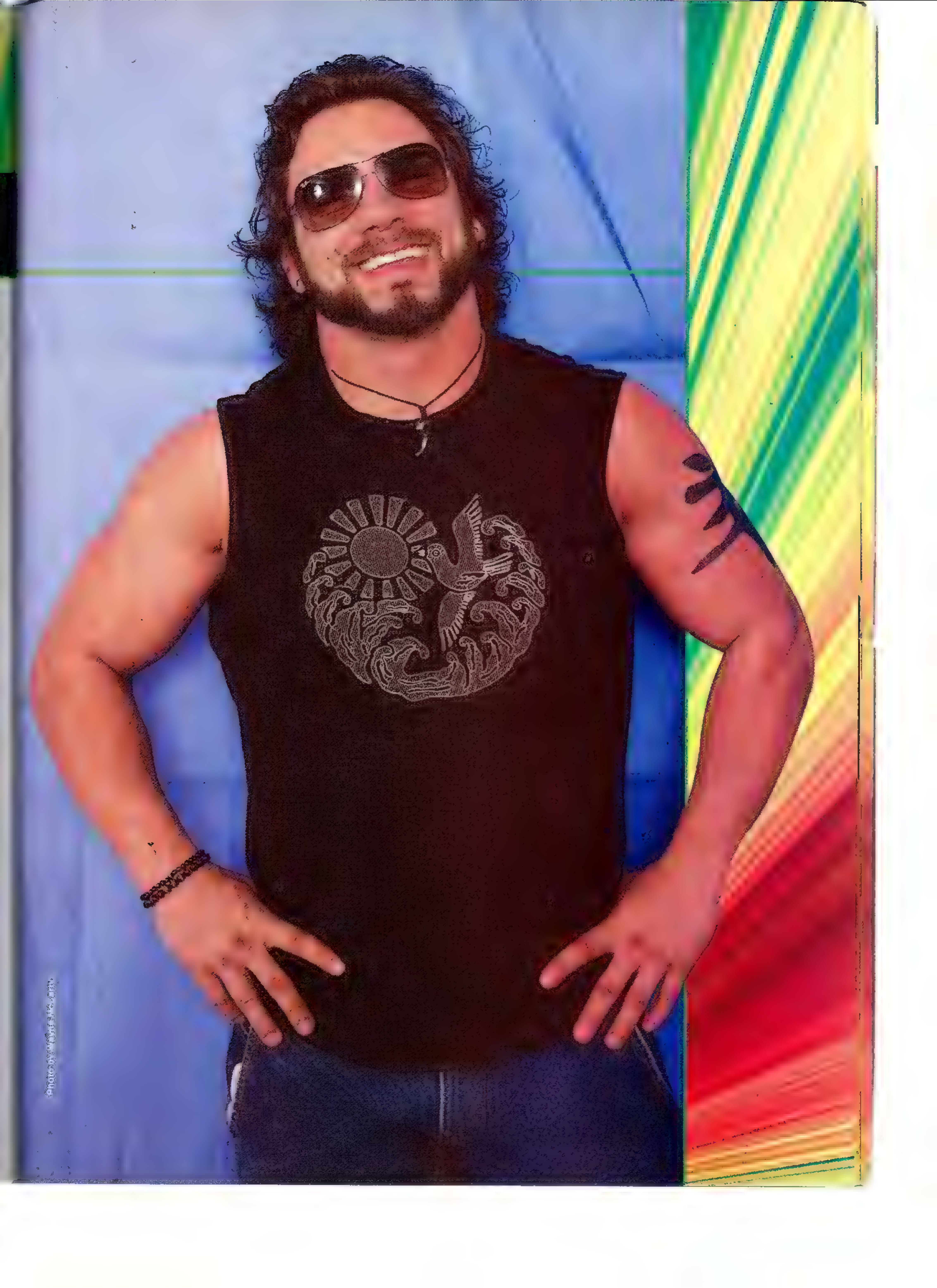
**CAREER GROWTH:** In the short term, leaving TNA for ROH was a big step backward. Aries had new worlds to conquer but instead chose to go back into his comfort zone. However, working with ROH has given him more opportunities to compete in Japan, where physical size matters less than pure wrestling ability. He also seems to have rediscovered his passion in ROH, as opposed to seeming frustrated in TNA. He avoided burnout by taking a step back, which is a wise strategy. Now it's time to take a big step forward. **GRADE: B**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Aries is a remarkably talented wrestler who speaks his mind. He'll be as big of a star as the stage on which he performs. He's as big a star as ROH has. The only way he'll get bigger is if he finds a grander stage ... but has he burned too many bridges to find one? **GRADE: B-**



Photo by Joe Zanolle







# MELINA

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Melina has found herself locked out of the WWE women's title picture ever since she lost the title to Candice Michelle at Vengeance last year. Melina made the error of taking the *Playboy* cover girl too lightly and was relieved of her championship as a result. But before she could get a chance to regroup and win the title back, Beth Phoenix swooped in and the belt has remained around her waist ever since. Melina wrestled with much more confidence and bravado as champion and has failed to stand out from the pack since that loss to Michelle. A year ago, Melina was a threat both as a manager and a wrestler. Today, she's no longer managing and she's less of a threat as a wrestler than she has ever been. **GRADE: C**

**MARKETABILITY:** Melina is the kind of woman who becomes the center of attention the moment she enters a room. Unlike some WWE Divas (such as Maryse and Lena Yada) who struggle to connect with an audience, Melina can instantly garner a reaction from the crowd. She has said she has no interest in posing for *Playboy* or exploiting her looks, which somewhat limits her mainstream marketability. But,

like Victoria, Melina has developed a fan following who appreciate her combination of skill and beauty. She's in the top tier of Divas in terms of her wrestling career, but has to take a back seat to the Marias and Candices of the world, whose willingness to strip is looked fondly upon by WWE. **GRADE: B**

**REPERTOIRE:** This is one area where Melina has improved tremendously over the past two years. She has put her flexibility to good use and developed impressive moves, like her inverted legdrop bulldog and her spinning neckscissors takedown. She has developed a formidable STF variation and knows how to slow down the pace of a match by using armbars and chokes. However, she has an unmistakable flair for the dramatic. If Melina has a choice, she will always try for the most impressive-looking move instead of the most practical one. That may win her style points, but style points don't win championships. She needs to concentrate a little more on the steak and a little less on the sizzle. **GRADE: B**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Melina has been keeping a relatively low profile—or at least she's not screaming as loudly as she used to. She might be biding her time and trying to figure out exactly how she should handle the phenomenon that is Phoenix. She looks reluctant to challenge Phoenix head-to-head and is waiting for someone else to do the dirty work for her. She needs to get her swagger back. Whether she wins or loses, facing opponents like Phoenix and Victoria will ultimately make her a better wrestler. **GRADE: B-**

**OVERALL VALUE:** In many ways, Melina is a model WWE Diva. She put in a lot of hard work and gradually developed into a worthy successor to Trish Stratus and Lita. **GRADE: B-**



Photo by George Napolitano





Photo by George Kapellano



# BOOKER T

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Jumping from WWE to TNA was a risky move, and it isn't one that has paid immediate dividends for Booker T. On August 27, Booker had his last WWE match, losing by disqualification to John Cena on Raw. He left the company in October after being implicated in the Signature Pharmacy drug scandal and signed with TNA to get a fresh start to his career. After debuting in the main event of Genesis, Booker said his goals were twofold: to test his skills against young talent and to win the TNA World title. Since then, Booker has suffered several embarrassing losses to Robert Roode. He may be testing himself against Roode, but so far, he hasn't been winning. **GRADE: C**



Photo by Leo South/TNA Wrestling

**MARKETABILITY:** Booker still has plenty of name recognition from his years in WWE and WCW. Just two years ago, he reigned supreme as the Smackdown World champion and won the "Champion Of Champions" match at Cyber Sunday in 2006. But losses to Batista, The Undertaker, and Triple-H dropped him a few pegs, and he needs a particularly good showing in TNA to show critics he's not a washed-up WWE castoff. So far, he hasn't had the success he needs to successfully reinvent himself. **GRADE: B**

**REPERTOIRE:** Booker seems to be having difficulty adjusting to TNA's six-sided ring. Many of his signature moves (such as the ax kick, jumping side kick, and Harlem hangover legdrop) depend on him successfully measuring his steps and timing his attack for maximum efficiency. He hasn't quite been able to adapt to the different contours of the TNA ring. As a result, he often hits his opponent with less force and power than desired. When he keeps the action in the center of the ring, Booker looks like the fleet-footed striker he has always been. But he's visibly slower and less effective now than he was a year ago. **GRADE: B**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Even without the Signature scandal, Booker was on thin ice in WWE. He had been with the company since 2001 and appeared to be on the downside of his tenure there. He could have settled back into a mid-card role in the company, or possibly jumped to ECW for a fresh start on that brand. Instead, he chose TNA, where he can be a valuable veteran asset for a growing promotion. He seems rejuvenated and has to be considered a top contender to the TNA World title, but with Samoa Joe, Kurt Angle, Kevin Nash, and others already ahead of him in the pecking order, he's going to have to prove himself if he wants a title match. **GRADE: B-**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Booker still brings a lot to the table. He has credibility and is effective as both a fan favorite and a rulebreaker. He can do comedy as well as anyone, and he seems committed to working with younger wrestlers to help them improve. The question is whether he wants to settle for being a veteran and mentor or if he wants to win his seventh world title. **GRADE: B-**



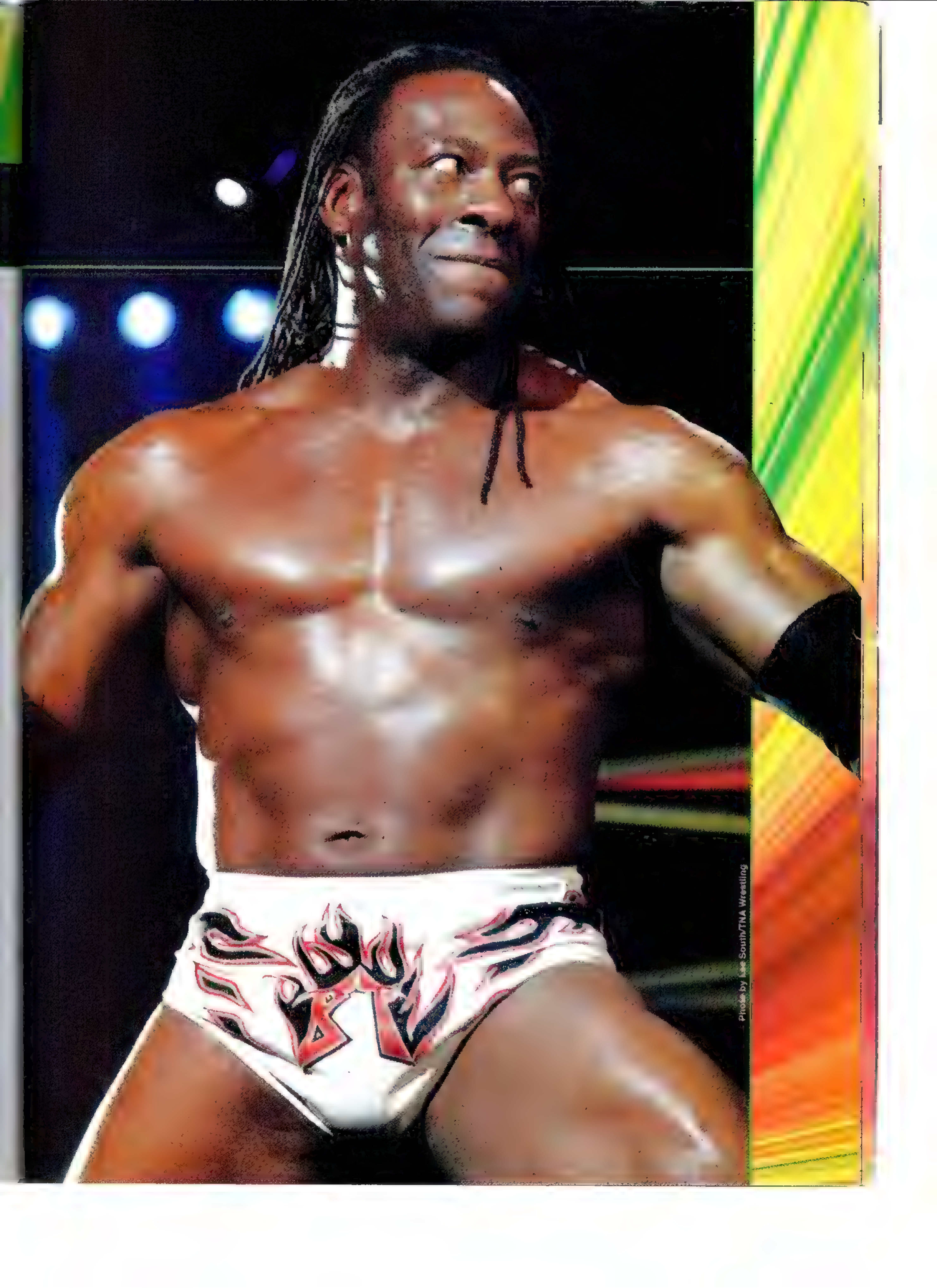


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



# Santino

# MARELLA

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** If you're judging Goal Achievement based entirely on won-loss records, then Santino Marella has had an atrocious year. Fortunately for him, we're looking at more than just the number of times he's had his arm raised in victory. For the past several months, Marella has been the most consistently entertaining performer on any WWE brand. He has a great comedic delivery and a spontaneity about him that makes him fun to watch. He may be someone the fans love to hate, but his segments are frequently the ones talked about the most at the water cooler on Tuesdays. **GRADE: C+**

**MARKETABILITY:** Santino's "romance" with Maria resulted in plenty of memorable moments, such as his feud with Ron Simmons, his Royal Rumble promo (where he claimed the Madison Square Garden crowd would cheer for hepatitis, which they did), and his hilarious pre-WrestleMania skit with Snoop Dogg. Now that he and Maria

have broken up, we'll have to see if Marella can keep striking comic gold without his doe-eyed foil. We suspect he can. In fact, we think Maria might have been holding him back. If Marella can recruit an enforcer-type to watch his back, he could actually make some waves on the Raw brand. But he's going to start winning some matches to achieve his potential. **GRADE: B-**

**REPERTOIRE:** Marella reportedly has some experience in judo and mixed martial arts, but he has yet to showcase those skills in WWE. He occasionally uses a triangle choke, but usually uses low kicks and basic slams to set up a swinging neckbreaker as his finisher of choice. If Marella ever wants to be taken seriously, he needs to stop playing the buffoon and show he can be dangerous in the ring. **GRADE: C**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Santino's first year in WWE has been completely backward. He won the Intercontinental title in his first match and worked into becoming a bumbling goofball. Marella's frustration over Maria appearing in *Playboy* is obscuring the fact that he also had short feuds with legends like Steve Austin and Jerry Lawler. As a fan favorite, he survived a potentially devastating fan backlash by developing into one of the most entertaining heel characters in years. He has shown some real star power when he's had an opportunity. He's wrestling's equivalent of Steve Carell—he's a great character actor who steals every scene he's in. He's just waiting for a breakthrough starring role. **GRADE: B**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Now that the Maria affair has run its course, there are a few directions in which he could go. He could follow in Matt Striker's footsteps and become a manager. He could take a pointer from Roddy Piper and recruit a Bob Orton-style "tough guy" bodyguard to protect him as he runs his mouth. He could cozy up to another Diva (or Divas) and see if he could re-create the chemistry he had with Maria. He could even become a color commentator. We think he could excel in any of those roles. But ultimately, to be a success, he needs to show some killer instinct in the ring. He has the intangibles down pat ... we just need to see something tangible. **GRADE: B-**



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# Traci

# BROOKS

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** For years, we lamented the fact that TNA had a talented and capable woman like Traci Brooks under contract and didn't have a women's division where she could compete. Now that TNA has established the Knockouts division, Traci finally has an opportunity to show her wrestling skills. Her first order of business, however, has been to get revenge on Payton Banks and Robert Roode. She's finally out from under Roode's oppression, but now she's going to be tested against formidable opponents like Awesome Kong, Gail Kim, and ODB. It's time to see if Brooks is ready for the challenge. **GRADE: B**

**MARKETABILITY:** Traci is fond of saying she puts the "T&A in TNA." She is the longest-tenured lady in TNA,

and we can think of two big reasons why she maintains her popularity. She has a devoted fan base and is arguably the most popular pinup girl in the company. But she is in danger of being eclipsed by the new, younger batch of Knockouts on that front. **GRADE: B**

**REPERTOIRE:** It has become clear that Brooks needs to ratchet up her game if she is going to succeed against the current crop of TNA Knockouts. She lacks the power of Kong and ODB. Her repertoire is fairly basic and can't hold up against the fast-paced, aerial style of Gail Kim. She has spent a lot of time outside the ring as a valet and the competition has passed her by. She needs more than the old pie-in-the-sky and a mediocre clothesline if she's going to win a championship. **GRADE: C**

**CAREER GROWTH:** For the first time in years, Traci is more focused on her wrestling career than her managing career, and that is a very good thing. However, she's wasting her time getting into catfights with Banks. She needs to put Roode and Banks firmly behind her and concentrate on taking her wrestling career to a new level. She has taken the first few steps, but she needs to establish herself as a championship contender and not just a woman scorned. **GRADE: B**

**OVERALL VALUE:** With the influx of women like Angelina Love, Velvet Sky, and Roxxi Laveaux, Brooks is no longer unique. There are more women in TNA than ever before, and that means more competition for Traci. She is in unfamiliar territory, and the next few months could really make or break her career. If she can improve her wrestling game, she can win the women's title and finally have the *wrestling* career she has wanted since she broke into the sport in 2000. If she doesn't have what it takes to compete against the cream of the crop in the women's division, she may have to go back to managing. As a manager, she's not particularly valuable. But if she can hold her own against Kong and others, her climb to the top of the women's division could be TNA's feel-good story of the year. Traci's value—and her career—are ultimately in her own hands. **GRADE: B-**



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling





Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



A.V.

# STYLES

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** It's hard to believe that A.J. Styles is a three-time former NWA champion. Styles has allowed himself to become the clown prince of the Angle Alliance. First he almost had a nervous breakdown trying to decide whether to side with Christian Cage or Kurt Angle, and then he became smitten with Karen. He's allowed himself to become a punch line, and that's just a shame considering he is one of the most talented wrestlers in the sport today. Until he gets his head on right, there's virtually no chance of him regaining his standing as one of the top singles stars in TNA. **GRADE: C**

**MARKETABILITY:** Styles will always have a strong fan base. No matter how ridiculous a gimmick with which he's saddled, his athleticism shines through. He may actually be winning over new fans with the way he's

sweetly wooing Karen Angle, like a spandex-clad Lloyd Dobler trying to win the heart of Jone Skye in *Say Anything*. But two years ago, Styles was the centerpiece of TNA's marketing efforts. He was prominently featured on every DVD case and every commercial. Now he has taken a back seat to Angle, Samoa Joe, Kevin Nash, and has become a second-tier player. **GRADE: B**

**REPERTOIRE:** Styles gets plenty of credit for being one of the sport's top innovators, but lately he has been a bit stagnant, relying too much on his vaunted Pele kick and Fosbury flop plancha. Both moves are graceful and awe-inspiring, but both also put him at unnecessary risk as he must jump backward and hope he can connect with his opponent without landing on his head. He needs to get back to more of his classic ground game which features an array of suplexes and submission moves. Styles has one of the most comprehensive offensive arsenals in wrestling, but his move selection of late is questionable. He just doesn't seem as focused as he did in 2004 and 2005. **GRADE: B+**

**CAREER GROWTH:** The fans voted Styles "Mr. TNA" in 2004, 2005, and 2006. As 2008 opened, Styles was losing "Turkey Bowl" matches against Samoa Joe and "Christmas Chaos" matches against Kaz, forcing Styles into a turkey suit and a reindeer costume. TNA's franchise player has become a joke, and Styles has allowed it to happen. It's a testament to Styles' skill (and Tomko's emergence) that he is a tag team champion and that he's still a focal part of TNA as part of the Angle Alliance. But there's no denying his career has taken a big backward step. **GRADE: C**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Styles can be entertaining in his role as the clueless wonder of the Angle Alliance, but he would be most valuable if he stood up to Angle and made a serious run at the World title. Angle versus a focused Styles could be a Match of the Year contender ... as long as it's not some kind of gimmicky "Karen Angle On A Pole" travesty. Styles is a bit player now, but he's one babyface turn away from reclaiming his status as one of wrestling's elite stars. **GRADE: B-**



Photo by George Tahino



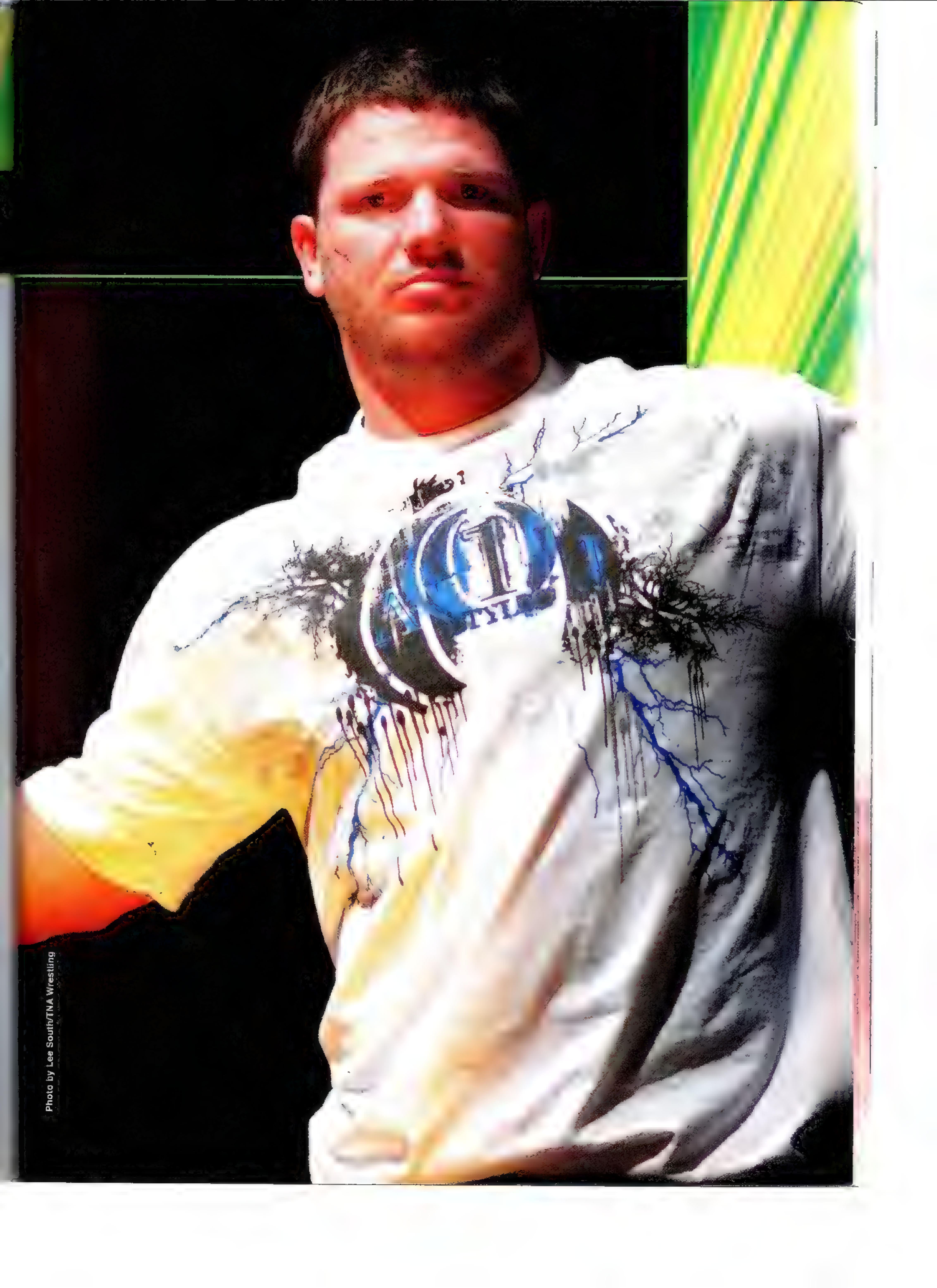


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



# Maria

# KANFELLS

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Maria is the latest WWE Diva to make the jump from the ring to the pages of *Playboy* magazine. She's getting massive mainstream exposure and has the potential to be the next Stacy Keibler—the woman who used wrestling as a steppingstone to an acting career. While Maria has been vocal about her desire to stay with WWE, we can't help but wonder if she'll feel the same way in six months when casting agents start calling. She has gone from being a clueless backstage interviewer to being one of WWE's most heavily promoted stars. If her underlying goal is to become famous, she's doing great. If her underlying goal is to become a great wrestler, she still has a long way to go. **GRADE: B**

**MARKETABILITY:** It may sound cliché, but Maria may have the most beautiful pair of eyes we've ever seen. Of course, she has a body that could stop a war, but her eyes are really her greatest feature. She has the ability to look through the camera lens and actually make eye contact with the viewer. She may be the most photogenic Diva since Miss Elizabeth. She'll sell plenty of merchandise, even with her clothes on. **GRADE: A+**

**REPERTOIRE:** Maria has improved significantly as a wrestler over the past year, but she's still not ready for prime time. Maria goes for her version of the bronco buster whenever she gets a chance. The move may get a reaction from the crowd, but it doesn't inflict significant damage on her opponent, and it doesn't help Maria win the match. Maria may win her share of lingerie pillow fights, but she has no business competing against serious competitors like Beth Phoenix, Melina, or Mickie James. **GRADE: D**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Maria has developed into the top babyface female on the Raw roster, due both to her decision to pose for *Playboy* and for standing up to Santino Marella. Because of the publicity she has received for her *Playboy* spread, she is currently the most recognizable woman on the WWE roster. That's certainly an improvement over her days as a ditzy interviewer, but she's still on shaky ground. Look at the past WWE Divas who've posed for *Playboy*: Sable, Chyna, Torrie Wilson, Christy Hemme, Candice Michelle, and Ashley Massaro. All five have struggled after their pictorial. What should Maria do next? Is challenging Beth Phoenix really a wise strategy? **GRADE: B**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Maria's grades are all over the map—a D here, an A+ there. She's like a student that aces the English portion of the SATs but bombs on the math. If Maria wants to be a sexy covergirl, you can bet WWE will put her picture on as many magazines as possible. But if she wants to be a legitimate wrestler, she has a long, *long* way to go. And with competition like Kelly Kelly hot on her heels, Maria is going to have to work hard to stay relevant once her *Playboy* buzz dies down. **GRADE: B-**



Photo by George Napolitano





Photo by George Napolitano



# BATISTA

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Does anyone remember WrestleMania 21? That was when Batista power-bombed his way to the Raw World title with an epic win over Triple-H. Who does Batista draw as his 'Mania dance partner in 2008? Umaga, in a pointless "Battle Of The Brands." Maybe it was just Batista's raw hatred of Triple-H that propelled him to superstardom and made him the top star in 2005, because Batista has shown a surprising inability to achieve on the Smackdown brand. He fell flat against Edge several times last year before beating The Great Khali for his World title. He finally evened the score somewhat by successfully defending the title against his nemesis, The Undertaker, before dropping the belt to Edge at Armageddon. Batista should be a dominant force, not a transitional champion or an afterthought at WrestleMania. **GRADE: C+**



Photo by George Napolitano

**MARKETABILITY:** There was a point when Batista was the top star in WWE, with John Cena trailing as a distant second. His well-documented scrap with Booker T, his failure to win championships at numerous PPVs, and his all-too-frequent injuries are all factors in his fall from grace. He's still a very popular figure on the Smackdown brand, but he's nowhere near the level of popularity he was just a couple of years ago. **GRADE: B-**

**REPERTOIRE:** Batista is still terribly one-dimensional, but he has a keen eye for detail. During his feud with Triple-H, he scouted HHH and uncovered weaknesses he could exploit. He did the same with The Undertaker. When pressed by more aggressive opponents, he can counter-wrestle. But Batista is much more comfortable utilizing a pure power offense. As we have seen, an upper body injury or an opponent attacking his knees has limited Batista's overall effectiveness. That's why he'll beat The Great Khali of this world but will struggle against Edge and MVP. **GRADE: C**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Batista's career has momentum ... but it's in the wrong direction. And his WrestleMania match with Umaga probably won't change that. Batista feuded with both Undertaker and Edge throughout 2007, and those matches have lost a lot of their appeal because we have seen them so often. That will make it more difficult for Batista to earn World title shots, since 'Taker and Edge currently are warring over that belt. Batista has to hope he gets dealt back to the Raw brand in this year's draft lottery, or else he may want to set his sights a little lower and win the U.S. title. He needs to move in a different direction and make the fans take notice of him again. **GRADE: C**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Batista has already demonstrated that he can be the go-to guy in WWE. He (usually) carries himself like a champion and can excel on the main event stage. But without his drive, he's just another Kane: a big, strong guy who gets a good crowd reaction and chokes in the big matches. Is that really how he wants to be remembered? **GRADE: C+**





Craig Ambrosio/WWE/Courtesy of CW Network



# FINLAY

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Finlay really does have the luck of the Irish. At 50 years old, he's still going strong in WWE and even became involved in one of the top storylines, feuding with Vince McMahon over Hornswoggle. That being said, it's hard to understand Finlay's motivations. If he really is Hornswoggle's father, why did he go along with the whole ruse to trick McMahon into believing Hornswoggle was McMahon's son? It seems like an awfully cruel prank for a father to pull on his son. He hasn't challenged for any titles since dropping the U.S. title in 2006. It seems like his only goals are to put Hornswoggle in danger and run out to make the save. **GRADE: C**

**MARKETABILITY:** There's no doubt Finlay could become the grand marshal of just about any St.

Patrick's Day parade he chooses to join, but it takes more than the admiration of fellow Irishmen to be a marketable commodity. Finlay gets a good reaction when he's accompanied by Hornswoggle, but when he's by himself, you can almost hear crickets chirping in the arena. He's a no-frills wrestler, and while he has his supporters, a no-frills wrestler isn't very marketable. **GRADE: C-**

**REPERTOIRE:** Finlay has the most distinctive ring style in any WWE brand. He utilizes a lot of mat work, combined with pit-fighting tactics like bending back fingers, fish-hooking the mouth or eyes, and stomping on fingers. He successfully marries superior technical skills with sadism. His biggest problem is that it can take him four or five minutes to really warm up.

Because he is slower than many of his opponents, he frequently gets overwhelmed early and has to brawl his way out of trouble. Of course, he loves to fight, but brawling isn't what he does best and it puts him off his game. He needs to do a better job of controlling the pace of a match and keep his vaunted Irish temper under control. **GRADE: B+**

**CAREER GROWTH:** This is a tough area to assess. It looked like Finlay's career was over 10 years ago when he suffered a nasty gash. He had a comeback in 2000, but settled into a role as a backstage agent. He made a very surprising comeback in 2006 and has thrived in WWE, despite being older and smaller than most of the wrestlers on the roster. But the future looks uncertain for Finlay. It's hard to see him remaining a fan favorite on the Raw brand, especially since audiences have been slow in warming up to him. It feels as if he's on a downward slide. **GRADE: C**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Finlay can be an excellent mentor to the younger WWE wrestlers. He got a lot of credit for helping Bobby Lashley improve during their feud, and he can help others. He has an encyclopedia of knowledge to share and he's willing to do so. He's more valuable in that capacity than as a competitor. **GRADE: C+**



David Dunn/WWE/Courtesy of CW Network





Rich Freeda/WWE/Courtesy of CW Network



# Team 3D

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Last year we gave Team 3D an A- in this category. They were fresh off winning the NWA World tag title, making them the only team in history ever to win the ECW, WWE, WCW, NWA, and TNA championships. Brothers Ray and Devon claimed that—plus their success in Japan—made them the greatest tag team of all time. We said they still had more to prove. They beat two-halves of great teams by beating Rick Steiner and Road Warrior Animal at Slammiversary, and they looked good by beating LAX and A.J. Styles and Christopher Daniels in a three-way on *Impact*. But since losing the title to Samoa Joe and Kurt Angle, Team 3D has tanked, fighting a losing war against the X division and being humiliated by Curry Man and Shark Boy. For a team out to prove they're the best ever, they did a lousy job of showing it. **GRADE: C-**



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

**MARKETABILITY:** Brother Ray doesn't get the respect he deserves for being one of the most versatile performers in wrestling. He is equally adept at cutting intense promos as he is at doing comedy bits. He was particularly good when he and Devon turned heel by running down the Steiner Brothers and has been very funny trying to make weight in accordance with the 275-pound stipulation. He can incite riots, he can scare the living daylights out of you, and he can be a clown. Because of his versatility and Devon's stoic intensity, Team 3D has thrived in every promotion they have entered. They're probably the most marketable team in wrestling ... until the Motor City Machine Guns catch up to them. **GRADE: A**

**REPERTOIRE:** Team 3D has a bully mentality, and that's starting to hurt Brothers Ray and Devon. When they are facing smaller opponents, they get too caught up in playing games to wrestle effectively. They rely on manhandling the little guys and laughing about it, and they get burned time and time again. They pulled the bully routine against Angle and Joe, too. With their decade of experience as a team, they had a distinct advantage over Joe and Angle, who were openly hostile toward each other. But instead of using smart tag team strategy, they allowed themselves to get caught up in a slugfest, and it cost them the belts. Maybe they should put a call out to Joel Gertner and see if he could help them stay focused. **GRADE: B**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Team 3D took a big step backward over the past six months. It's time for them to either challenge Tomko and Styles for the title, or take another tour of Japan to get their priorities back in order. There's no way they should be losing "Fish Market" streetfights to Shark Boy and Curry Man. **GRADE: D**

**OVERALL VALUE:** It's odd ... when Team 3D is wrestling at its best, they seem to grow stale. When they're slumping, they're much more entertaining. They need to find a way to combine the entertainment with the in-ring production. They can get people talking and deliver good matches, but they are underachieving. **GRADE: C+**





Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling



# Chavo

# GUERRERO

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Chavo finally won a major singles championship, but the circumstances surrounding his win were suspect to say the least. If not for the political pull of his aunt, Vickie Guerrero, Chavo may never have had the opportunity to contend for the ECW title. Ever since Eddie's death, Chavo has been quick to exploit his family name for his personal gain. He managed to pull off the upset over C.M. Punk, but that just means he's the champion of a struggling brand. In fact, the consensus opinion is that Punk has gone on to bigger and better things, while Chavo was saddled with a dead-end championship. Still, the ECW title has more visibility than the cruiserweight title he once held dear. The ECW title is a small step forward for Chavo, but the onus is now on him to raise the visibility of that championship. **GRADE: B**

**MARKETABILITY:** Chavo is the runt of the Guerrero litter. He's not as talented or as charismatic as his famous family members. He's a skilled competitor, but the Guerrero name does more for him than he does for the Guerrero name. Chavo is no Eddie. Heck, he's no Mando. **GRADE: C**

**REPERTOIRE:** Chavo has adopted some of Eddie's trademark moves as a tribute to his uncle. While his heart may be in the right place, he's doing himself a disservice. While he may get a reaction out of the fans whenever he strings together three snap suplexes (à la Eddie's three amigos sequence), he's merely reminding people of his uncle. He's comes across like a guitar player who used to be part of a major band, playing cover songs in a second-rate barroom. Chavo isn't Eddie, and he never will be. The more he fixates on trying to recreate Eddie's trademark moves, the more he reminds us of how much better Eddie was. Chavo needs to spend more time developing his own move set instead of relying on moves popularized by Eddie and Gory Guerrero. **GRADE: C+**

**CAREER GROWTH:** There once was a time when winning the ECW title could be considered a career highlight. That was a long time ago, and a different ECW from the one we see each week on the Sci Fi Channel. Chavo's ECW title reign almost feels forced, like he fell into the championship simply by virtue of being in the right place at the right time. Chavo needs to definitely prove he can beat Punk, or he needs to take the title in a new direction if he ever wants to receive his proper accolades. Like Chavo himself, the ECW title has been steeped in mediocrity since it was resurrected in 2006. Chavo still needs to prove that he—and the ECW title—are worthy of respect. **GRADE: C**

**OVERALL VALUE:** It may sound like we're being tough on Chavo, and maybe we are. It's about time for Chavo to show he has more to offer other than a famous surname. ECW title or no ECW title, he needs to step up his game. **GRADE: C+**



Photo by Giorgio Napolitano







# Chris

# JERICO

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** The worst-kept secret in wrestling was broken wide open when it was revealed that good old Y2J was behind all of those cryptic "Save Us" promos in late-2007. The second coming of Jericho started with a bang when Jericho targeted Randy Orton right out of the chute. But after failing to bag the World title at Armageddon, Jericho got mired in a feud with JBL and quickly faded from the World title picture. He managed to win a record eighth Intercontinental title in March, but for a guy who said his goal was to save wrestling from Orton, the I-C title is not quite enough. **GRADE: B**

**MARKETABILITY:** Jericho has the gift of gab and can be one of the best promo men in the sport, but his cocky, funny style wasn't apparent during his recent grudge matches against JBL. While his much-ballyhooed return resulted in a huge spike in his popularity (and plenty of T-shirt sales), every week that went by after Armageddon sapped his appeal. Jericho made a big splash and now he's falling back. **GRADE: C**

**REPERTOIRE:** We like that Y2J had added the codebreaker to his arsenal. It's an impressive move that he can hit quickly and doesn't need quite as much setup as the walls of Jericho or lionsault. That being said, Jericho hasn't quite incorporated the move into his repertoire yet. He hasn't developed an adequate setup that can leave an opponent stunned and open to the move, without putting Jericho himself at risk. If Jericho rushes the codebreaker, his opponent can turn it into a modified power bomb. In his rush to get back to the ring and take advantage of John Cena's absence, we think Jericho was a little lax in training and has shown some signs of ring rust. We also think he tried too hard to land the codebreaker because he wanted to show off that move instead of finding natural openings for it during the course of the match. With a little more polish, he could already be the World champion. **GRADE: B-**

**CAREER GROWTH:** When Jericho was on his sabbatical from wrestling, people talked about how much they missed him. Now that he's back, he has become a background character once again. Jericho needs to shake things up. He's always had his most success as a rulebreaker. It's about time for him to go back to his heel roots. A trip over to the Smackdown brand and a protracted feud against Batista and The Undertaker might be just what he needs to get back to the top. **GRADE: C**

**OVERALL VALUE:** In the course of just three months, Jericho has dropped from being a World title contender to being an also-ran. Admittedly, a lot of that had to do with Cena's return, but Jericho can't use Cena as an excuse. He needs to make a bold move or risk falling further in the Raw rankings. **GRADE: C+**



Photo by George Napolitano



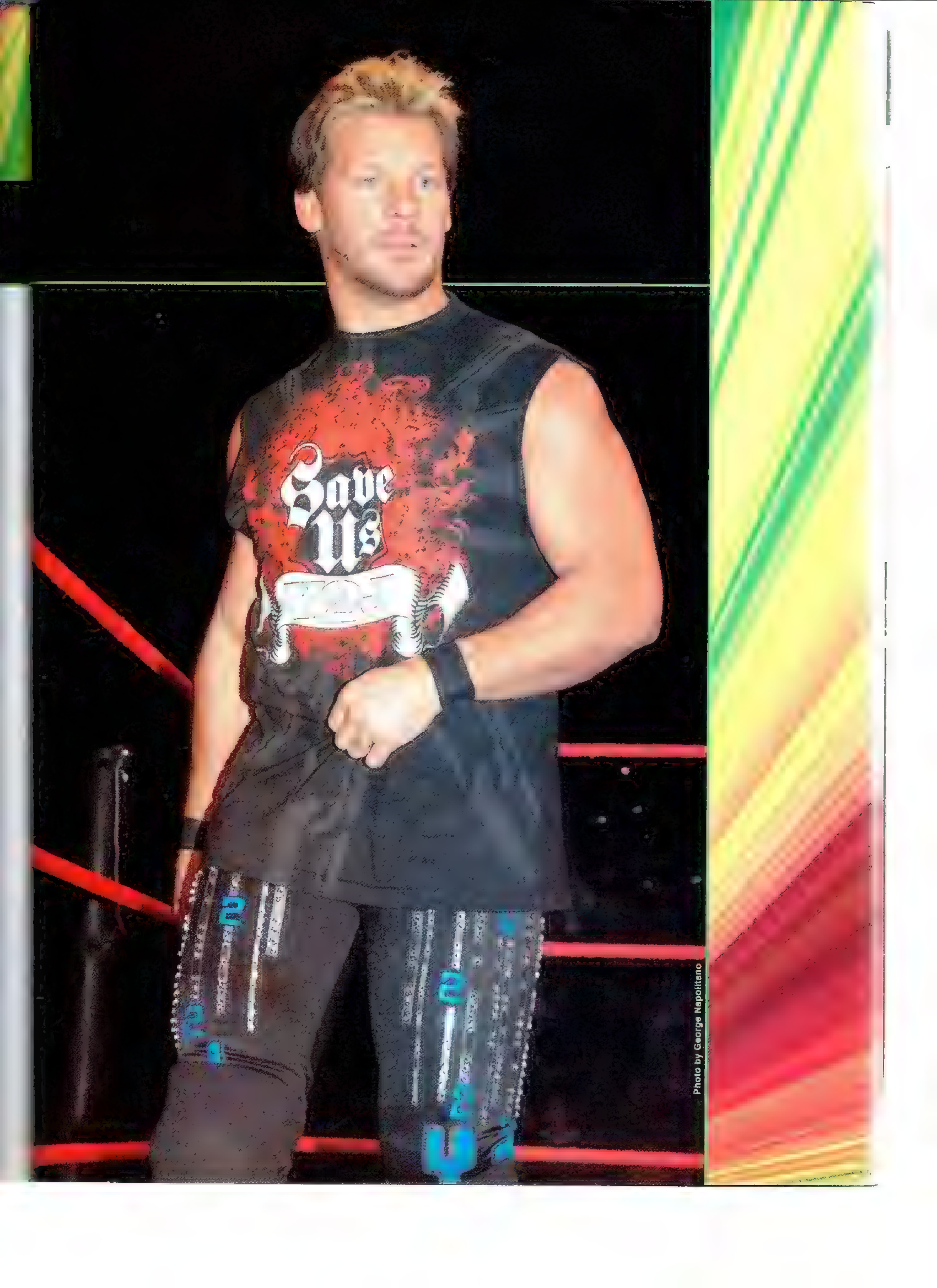


Photo by George Napolitano



# Robert

# ROODE

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** There may not be many things to admire as far as Robert Roode's character goes, but you certainly have to admire his drive to succeed. Ever since he split from Team Canada and started going by "Robert" instead of "Bobby," there has been no question about his ultimate goal, and that's to win the TNA World title. Roode has gone out of his way to face the biggest names in the company in hopes that he can get that one win that will propel him into the World title hunt. Roode's biggest problem, though, has been his inability to control his temper. His hot-headedness got him embroiled in feuds with Eric Young and Traci Brooks that distracted him from his true goal. While he is doing very well in his current feud with Booker T, Roode has awakened a bloodlust in Booker, and their series of grudge matches shows no signs of ending. Wrestling historians says the famous Buzz Sawyer/Tommy Rich feud of 1981-83 almost ended both men's careers. Roode may be in the same danger. **GRADE: B-**

**MARKETABILITY:** There seems to be a lot of shades of gray in TNA, but Roode is a 100-percent, old-fashioned bad guy. He hasn't established the credibility to take him to the next level yet, and he sometimes appears a little clumsy behind the mike. The most marketable thing about him is his valet, Payton Banks, and she's less marketable than Miss Brooks was. **GRADE: D**

**REPERTOIRE:** Roode has good upper-body strength and a very aggressive streak. Put those two ingredients together and you have one mean bully. He favors a slower-paced game plan and uses traditional wear-down holds to control the flow of the match. It's not necessarily pretty, but it's effective. The flashiest part of his game is his Terry Taylor hand-me-down robe. **GRADE: B-**

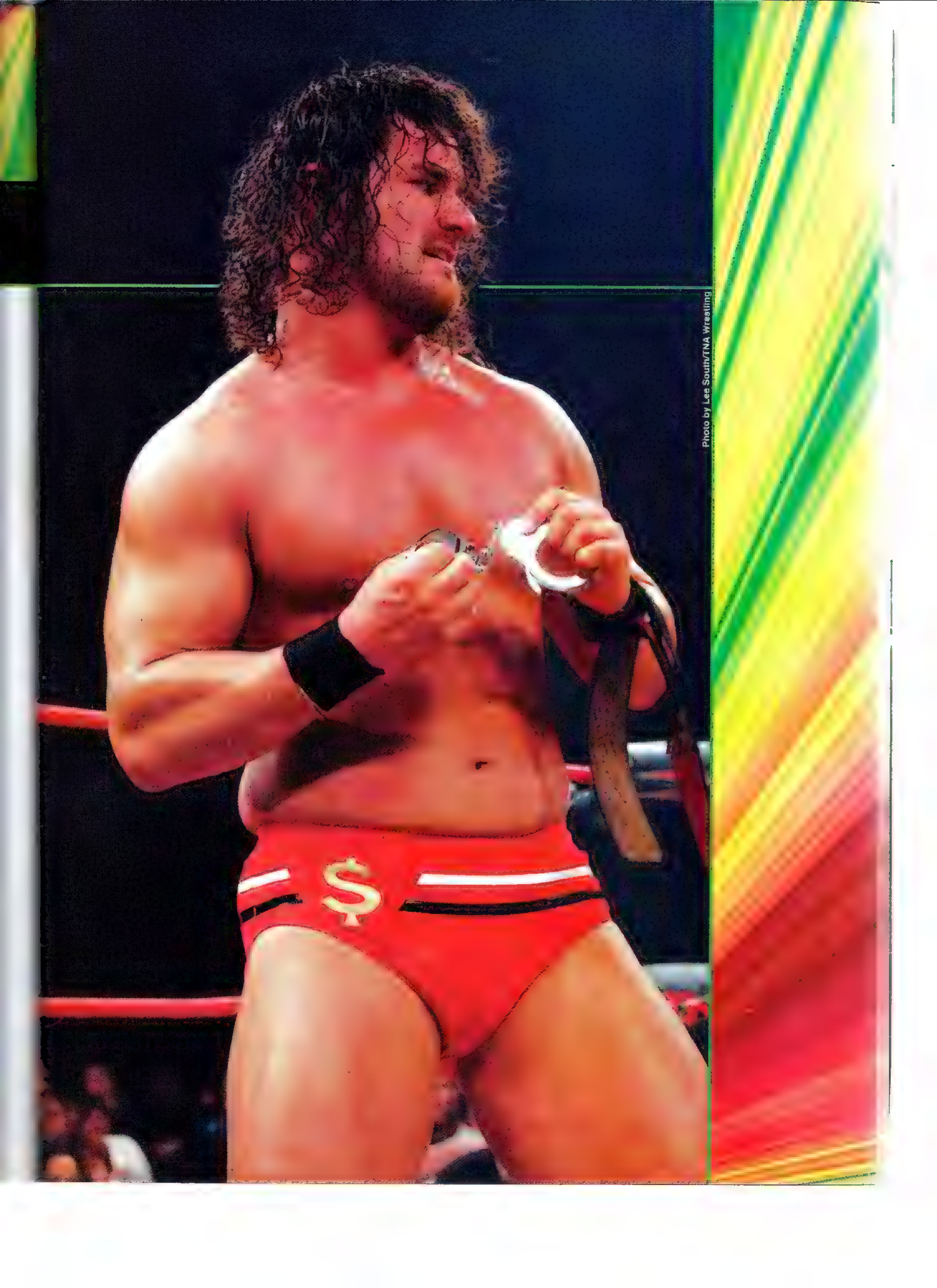
**CAREER GROWTH:** If he can continue to dominate his feud with Booker T, Roode is on the verge of a true breakout. However, he needs to show that he can keep his focus and not get sidetracked by petty vendettas. Scott D'Amore has called Roode a future world champion and that may yet happen ... but it's still at least a couple of years off. **GRADE: B**

**OVERALL VALUE:** In his current role, Roode occupies the same upper-middle-card stratum as Rhino, Abyss, and James Storm. He would make an ideal Intercontinental or U.S. champion in WWE, but he's not the conventional X division champion, so there's not really a second-tier singles title for Roode to gun for in TNA. He has a good amount of upside potential as a heel champion in the vein of Jeff Jarrett, but he still needs more seasoning. If he doesn't break through to the main-event level within the next year, he may want to consider leaving TNA and trying his hand elsewhere. **GRADE: C+**



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling







# Tommy

# DREAMER

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** A year ago, Dreamer was one of the ECW Originals, along with Sabu, Rob Van Dam, and Sandman. Today, he's the only one left. The ECW where he competes today is a far cry from the original ECW where Dreamer earned the title of "The Innovator Of Violence," but Dreamer has managed to adapt to his new surroundings. Unfortunately, Dreamer's won-loss ratio is just terrible. He's basically a prelim wrestler living off his reputation, which is sad. While he always puts up a good fight, he's hardly relevant in 2008. **GRADE: C**

**MARKETABILITY:** As long as people remember the original ECW, Dreamer has a bit of marketability. He, Stevie Richards, Joey Styles, and Tazz are really the only links remaining from the Paul Heyman era and the bingo hall in Philly. Unfortunately, every time Dreamer is pinned by the likes of Elijah Burke, The Miz, and John Morrison, he's heaping another shovel-

ful of dirt on the grave of that legacy. Of course, if WWE produced a slick DVD retrospective of his career that featured the epic feud with Raven, the cane matches against Sandman, and the "Stairway To Hell" match against Brian Lee, it could sell well because of sheer nostalgia. **GRADE: C**

**REPERTOIRE:** Early in his career, Dreamer was a clean-cut, old-fashioned technical wrestler with modest aerial abilities. That style didn't serve him well in ECW, so he learned to brawl with the best of them. With so much of the hardcore element removed from the current ECW, Dreamer is a fish out of water. He still has one of the best DDTs in the business, but he doesn't have effective moves to set an opponent up for that move, nor the quickness to execute it without setup. Injuries built up through those hardcore years have slowed him considerably, limited his mobility, and affected his strength. He may want to talk to Tazz about adding the katahajime or a similar choke to his repertoire to give him another weapon that doesn't put his body at risk. **GRADE: C**

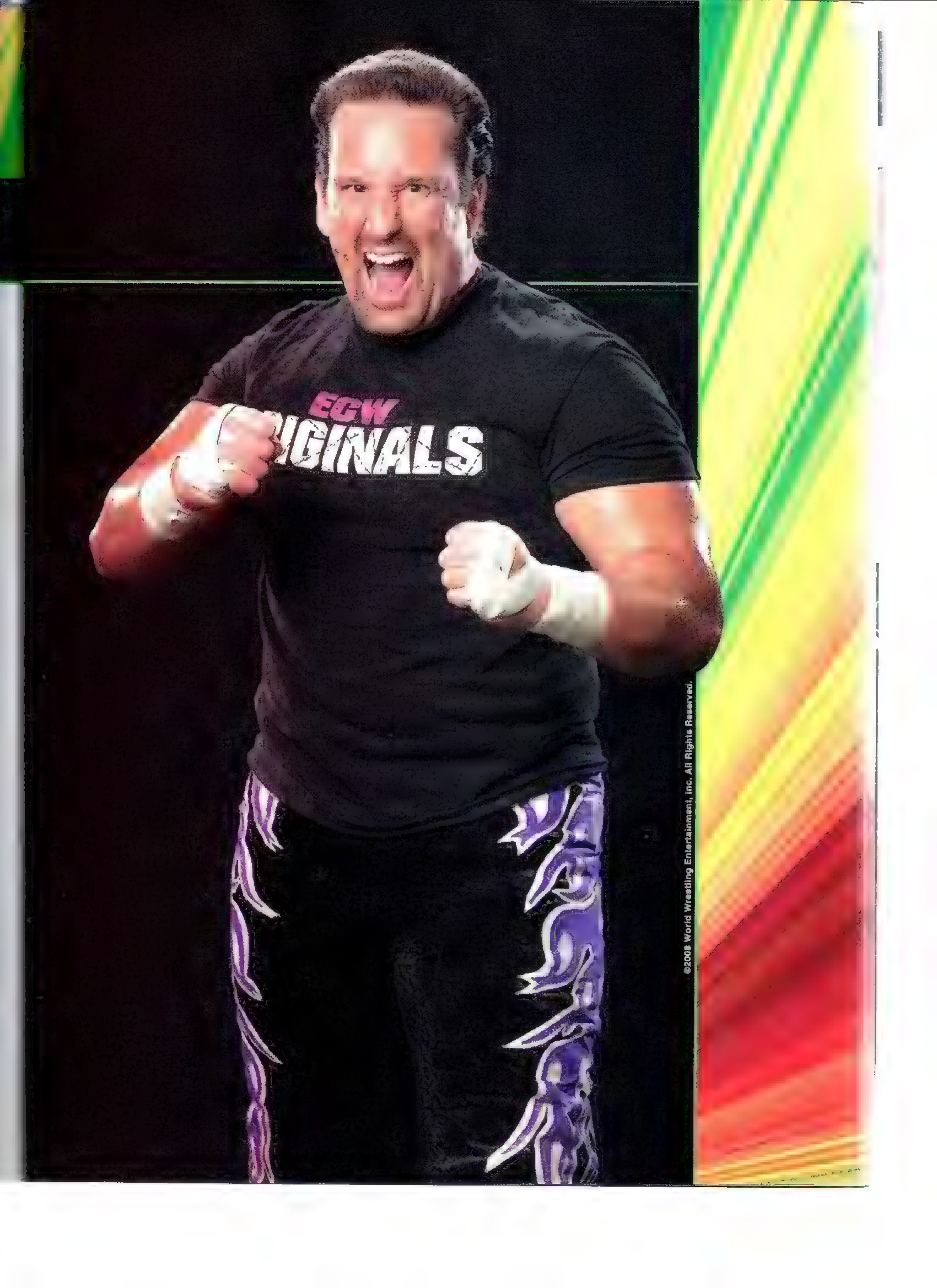
**CAREER GROWTH:** Dreamer built his reputation for his years-long quest to win the ECW title. That championship was his ultimate goal in life. Today, he's not even a blip on the radar screen, though he is on the cusp of winning the Smackdown World tag title with young Colin Delaney as his Mikey Whipwreck-style partner. But even if he did win that title, the team of Dreamer and Delaney would be hard-pressed to hold the belts for long. Instead of fighting for one feel-good win, Dreamer needs to have a solid plan for the future. **GRADE: C+**

**OVERALL VALUE:** If ECW lost Tommy Dreamer, they might as well just change the name of the brand. Dreamer represents the spirit of the old ECW. His presence is more symbolic than anything else, but he's an ECW institution. As long as there's an ECW, Dreamer has a home. **GRADE: C**



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# UMAGA

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** The “Samoan Bulldozer” has struggled since being separated from his former manager, Armando Alejandro Estrada. He’s still as dangerous as he ever was, but he’s like a rudderless ship. He has no direction and no purpose. It’s really a shame because Umaga was a genuine juggernaut in his matches against John Cena and Bobby Lashley. He doesn’t seem to have the same killer instinct he once had, and his career has stagnated as a result. In fact, there are rumors that the big Samoan may be headed to the Smackdown brand, which would be a big demotion to a man who came so close to relieving Cena of the Raw World title in 2007. **GRADE: C**



Photo by George Mpano ifano

**MARKETABILITY:** It took some time, but Umaga has gradually built up a bit of a cult following. There were a few moments last year when it as if Umaga was flirting with becoming a fan favorite. While Umaga never quite made the plunge, the fans’ reaction on the few occasions when he considered turning his rage against fellow rulebreakers shows that there are plenty of people willing to back the big man once he decides to don the white hat. **GRADE: B-**

**REPERTOIRE:** Umaga has great agility for a 300-plus pounder, but that’s usually just a polite way to say he’s not a complete slob. Umaga has done little to improve his game plan since appearing on the scene two years ago. His bread-and-butter is still nerve holds, thrust kicks, Samoan drops, and the big Samoan spike. It’s an effective game plan, but it’s one-dimensional. He can come off the top rope, but he’s more likely to miss a high-risk move than to connect. Considering how athletic and agile Umaga is, he needs to add more to his repertoire if he wants to succeed in 2008. **GRADE: C**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Last year, Umaga was part of one of the featured matches at WrestleMania, facing Lashley in the “Battle Of The Billionaires” between Vince McMahon and Donald Trump. This year, his match against Batista was almost an afterthought with little buildup and no real ramifications. Again, we can’t help but think Umaga is missing Estrada’s guidance. Umaga has slipped into the role of spoiler and fallen entirely out of world title contention. **GRADE: D**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Umaga debuted in WWE as a bloodthirsty monster. He has exhibited surprising staying power and has given us some memorable matches against Cena and Lashley. But Umaga has struggled without a high-profile fan favorite to feud against. Batista may be the man to bring Umaga back from the abyss. Umaga is a credible super-heel who hasn’t been given a prominent position in months. A win over Umaga can still make a career, but his value is dwindling. **GRADE: C**





Photo by George Napolitano



# Big

# DADDY V

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** We all but wrote off Big Daddy V after his run as Sexual Chocolate Version 2.0, but the big man from Memphis took off his silk shirt, grew out his Mohawk, and bought a pair of ill-fitting tights and managed to save his career. Viscera had been banished to the *Heat* hinterland when he was sent from Raw to Smackdown in the 2007 supplemental draft. The change of scenery gave him a new life as Big Daddy V and also gave rise to his most impressive winning streak since he challenged Diesel for the World title in 1995. But, after failing to capitalize on that new momentum by not winning a championship, Big Daddy V is threatening to run out of steam. **GRADE: B+**



Photo by George Napolitano

**MARKETABILITY:** Big Daddy V may be a more effective wrestler than the lovestruck Viscera of yesteryear, but he has none of the charisma he had as "The World's Largest Love Machine." No one's clamoring to watch Big Daddy V compete. **GRADE: D**

**REPERTOIRE:** BDV has one of the most effective belly-to-belly suplexes in the sport and his ghetto drop variation of the Samoan drop is impressive. But his entire offense is focused on the first four minutes of a match. If you can weather the initial storm and avoid being caught in a bearhug or hoisted off your feet, Big Daddy V begins to tire. His game plan isn't designed for long matches. To his credit, BDV effectively cuts off the ring and prevents opponents from getting to open spaces where they can avoid a clubbing chop or big elbow. But if you can sneak out of the corner and stick-and-move for a few minutes, you have an advantage over the big man. **GRADE: C+**

**CAREER GROWTH:** The change into Big Daddy V has given the former Viscera a prominent spot on the card in ECW and Smackdown. He and Mark Henry make a very impressive tag team, but they are barking up the wrong tree by feuding with Kane. BDV has always been at his best as a tag team wrestler, from his days in Men on a Mission to his team with Val Venis. He and Henry should become a full-time team and squash John Morrison and The Miz for the Smackdown World tag team belts. With Matt Striker in their corner, they might even be able to push for a match for the Raw tag belts and win those, too. They certainly have the size advantage over any other tag team in WWE today. But the longer V goes without winning a championship, the more he's eroding that aura of invincibility he has built up. **GRADE: C**

**OVERALL VALUE:** BDV is ECW's resident monster. He's dangerous. He's dominating. But he's in no way vital to the brand. He's basically a poor man's Umaga, and as long as guys like Umaga, Khali, and Kane are around, Big Daddy V doesn't stand out as anything special. **GRADE: C**



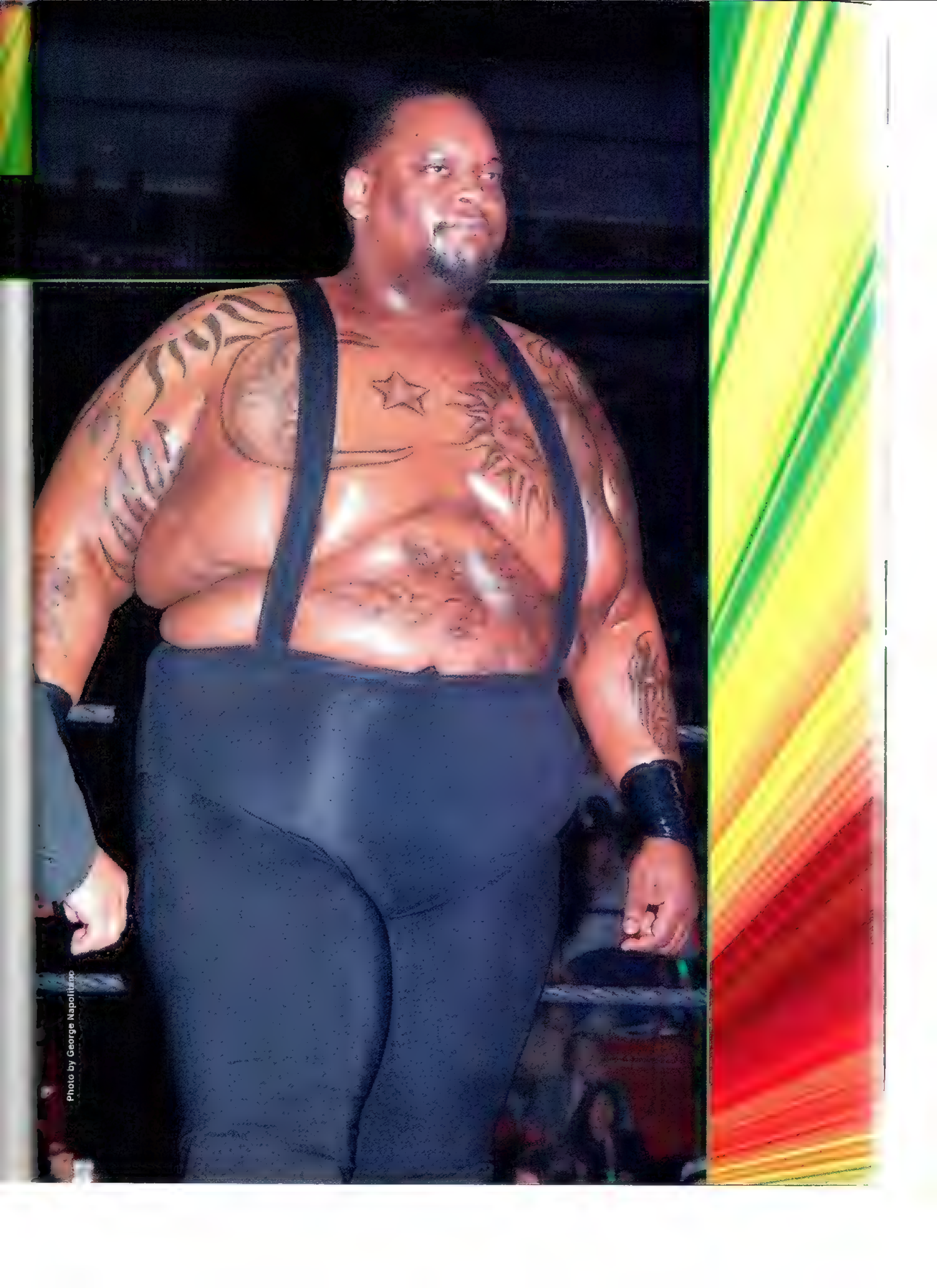


Photo by George Napolitano



# Ken

# KENNEDY

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Last year, Ken Kennedy won the "Money In The Bank" match at WrestleMania 23 and boldly declared he would cash in his title shot in the main event of WrestleMania 24. And that's about where things started to unravel. First, Kennedy suffered an injury initially diagnosed as a torn biceps that threatened to sideline him for up to seven months. Then Edge goaded the injured Kennedy (though he had not acknowledged the injury on TV) to put his "Money In The Bank" shot up for grabs in a one-on-one match. One of the constants about Kennedy is he never knows when to shut his mouth and not take the bait. He agreed to the match, lost the shot, and lost his momentum as well. Since being traded to Raw in the draft lottery, Kennedy has suffered losses to Umaga, John Cena, and Shawn Michaels, and also served a suspension for a violation of the WWE Wellness Policy. One year after the biggest win of his career, Kennedy was once again pinning his hopes on winning the MITB match to get back to where he was last year. **GRADE: F**



Photo by George Napolitano

**MARKETABILITY:** Kennedy is a great promo man and has shown superstar potential. While he has a fan following, Kennedy was born to be a rulebreaker. Like Randy Orton, that limits his upward mobility in the marketability department. Still, he sells an impressive number of T-shirts and his charisma can translate into PPV buys and TV ratings. **GRADE: B+**

**REPERTOIRE:** Kennedy's most impressive move is his Green Bay plunge, but it's an unwieldy move to execute. He not only has to be physically able to lift his opponent onto his shoulders and execute a front somersault without landing on his head, but to get the most out of the move he needs to climb to the second turnbuckle with his opponent on his back. A move that complicated to set up isn't going to cut it at the main-event level. His mike check STO is formidable, if not particularly original. His most effective, yet underrated, move may be his snap DDT. In a lot of ways he uses an old-school style that still needs some development (i.e. more submission moves or striking combinations) if he wants to succeed at the main-event level. **GRADE: C+**

**CAREER GROWTH:** When it was announced that Vincent Kennedy McMahon had an illegitimate son on the WWE roster, it didn't take long before fans were all over the Internet with their own Kennedy conspiracies. It certainly looked like that's where things were headed ... until Kennedy was suspended for violating the Wellness Policy. Kennedy drew even more attention to himself by proclaiming to the media that steroids were not as big a problem in WWE as most believed and then going out and getting busted. Things like that—and putting his MITB match on the line against Edge when he knew he was in no shape to compete—cause us to question Kennedy's judgment. He's still a potential future world champion, but he has to use his brain a little more. **GRADE: B**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Kennedy has the personality to become the top heel in WWE. He just needs to show he has some common sense and commitment to improving his game. **GRADE: C**





Photo by George Napolitano



# Bryan

# DANIELSON

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Bryan Danielson added to his legacy as the best non-WWE or TNA talent in the country by winning the Pro Wrestling Guerilla title, competing for the Ring of Honor and NWA titles, and touring Japan. Still, while earning the admiration of the fans and press, Danielson isn't in a position to make the kind of money many wrestlers with far less talent are making. Danielson was lauded for his excellent matches against Takeshi Morishima and Nigel McGuinness, but he failed to win the ROH title in both matches. If his goal is to earn a standing ovation from 700 fans, Danielson does it with almost every match. If his goal is to take his career to the next level, he's still coming up short. **GRADE: C**



Photo by Giorgio Tahnos

**MARKETABILITY:** We get it—Danielson is a no-nonsense wrestler with his 1950s-style trunks and plain boots. He doesn't care a bit about adding any flash to his look or his interviews to make himself more marketable. Well, we're tired of giving him the benefit of the doubt. From bell-to-bell, Danielson is captivating. The rest of the time he's like watching paint dry. It's about time for him to assert himself; we're done candy-coating it. **GRADE: F**

**REPERTOIRE:** While Danielson may be a dud in the marketability department, he's a stud in the repertoire category. No wrestler better melds MMA strikes and elbows, fluid chain wrestling, submission grappling, and high-risk aerial attacks as the "American Dragon." Danielson versus Kurt Angle would be an absolute dream match since Angle may be the only pro wrestler who can keep up with him. **GRADE: A+**

**CAREER GROWTH:** It takes more than pure wrestling ability to become a successful pro wrestler. If pro wrestling success was based purely on takedowns and pinning maneuvers, WWE and TNA would be recruiting more wrestlers right out of college and bringing them into the ring. One of the most important aspects of being a wrestler is the ability to combine wrestling ability and athleticism with showmanship, and that means more than just using a lot of flashy moves. Danielson knows this. He was trained by Shawn Michaels, one of the greatest showmen of this generation, for Pete's sake. He has watched as C.M. Punk and Samoa Joe added a little more to their overall personas and gone on to bigger and better things. The adulation of a percentage of diehard fans and two dollars is enough to buy you a cup of coffee. It's not enough to build a career on. **GRADE: D**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Okay, ROH fans, save the hate mail. Believe it or not, we appreciate Danielson's skills just as much as you do. For years we've wanted more; now we're demanding it. **GRADE: C-**





Photo by Wayne McCarty



# Mickie JAMES

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Blame Beth Phoenix. Big, bad Beth ruined the grading curve, and all the rest of the WWE Divas are suffering for it. From top to bottom, Mickie James may be the finest female wrestler on the Raw roster, but her spunk and enthusiasm have proven to be no match for Melina's underhandedness or Phoenix's raw power. With more and more women joining WWE each year, the pressure is on veterans like James to show she can compete with the new crop of Divas. Last year, James watched from the sidelines as Melina faced Ashley Massaro at WrestleMania 23. This year, she watched as Phoenix and Melina faced Maria and Ashley. She needs to prove she can stay competitive, and she has been falling short. **GRADE: D**



Photo by George Napolitano

**MARKETABILITY:** Mickie is the quintessential girl-next-door. Or, more appropriately, she's the girl every guy *wished* lived next door. She's a bubbly tomboy who doesn't back down from a challenge, and that has earned her respect. Yet, ever since becoming a fan favorite in 2006, James has lost her drive. She used to demand title matches and used psychological warfare to get an edge on her opponents (remember how she stalked Trish Stratus?). She's gotten so used to being overlooked that she short-changes herself. She needs to become a better self-promoter. **GRADE: C+**

**REPERTOIRE:** James uses her compact frame to its maximum efficiency. With her array of roundhouse kicks, she locks her knee and hip during the spin. That means her kick lands like a baseball bat in the midsection, without losing any inertia. She also has impressive lower-body strength and has been able to flip taller opponents with headscissors and huracanranas. Mickie's biggest weakness is her physical stature. At just 5'4" and 124 pounds, James lacks leverage, which diminishes the effectiveness of her suplexes and slams. She has to work that much harder and hit three or four big moves to put most opponents down for the three-count, while just one missed move can cost her a match. **GRADE: C+**

**CAREER GROWTH:** One of the biggest highlights of Mickie's year was her brief flirtation with Trevor Murdoch ... and that wasn't particularly memorable at all. She ran into a brick wall in Phoenix. Until she can overcome "The Glamazon," she will be stuck in a rut. Admittedly, the same can also be said about most of the other WWE Divas. James, however, is a three-time women's champion. If she can't get the job done, it diminishes her accomplishments as a champion. **GRADE: C-**

**OVERALL VALUE:** If James could rediscover that inner psycho that made her so interesting to watch during her feud with Stratus, she could instantly enliven the women's division. In fact, maybe she can develop a psychological ploy to rattle Phoenix enough to give James the mental edge she needs. It's certainly worth a try, because Mickie becomes less relevant with each passing month. **GRADE: C-**



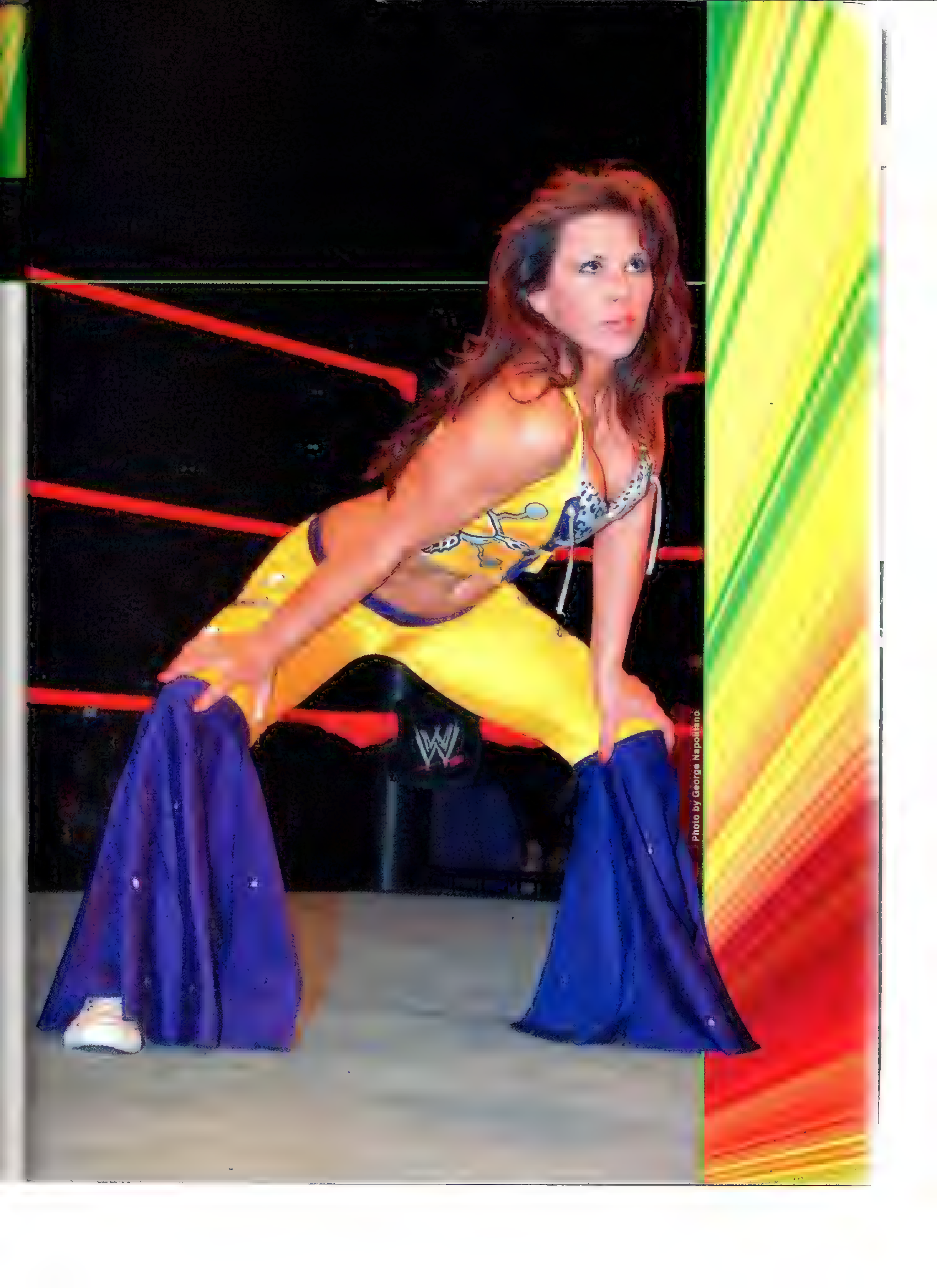


Photo by George Napolitano



Trevor

Lance

# MURDOCH & CADE

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** Cade and Murdoch have had a topsy-turvy year. They won their second Raw tag championship in June 2007 and then quickly turned against Matt and Jeff Hardy, a team they had claimed to respect and admire. With the Hardys too focused on singles competition to mount a viable challenge, the cowboy and the good ol' boy looked set to capitalize on a depleted Raw tag team roster and have a nice, long reign. But Cade and Murdoch never took advantage of the situation. They were upset by Paul London and Brian Kendrick in September. They regained the belts days later, but were upended by the unheralded team of Cody Rhodes and Bob Holly in December. As the senior team on the Raw brand, Cade and Murdoch have been a disappointment.

**GRADE: C**

**MARKETABILITY:** Last year, we suggested Cade and Murdoch might want to see if they could hook up with the "Blue Collar Comedy Tour" to try to improve their dismal Q Score (a marketing rating that evaluates brand popularity). They didn't bother to take our advice. And Murdoch still hasn't gotten an endorsement from either Red Man chewing tobacco or John Deere, either. Come on, guys! Try to do *something* to make yourselves marketable. **GRADE: D**

**REPERTOIRE:** Cade and Murdoch are two very talented individuals, who, one would think, would complement one another very well. Cade is a powerhouse with solid grappling skills and deceptive speed. Murdoch is a bare-knuckle fighter with an uncanny ability to find an opponent's weakness and exploit it. While they have chemistry as friends, they still have trouble working together. They aren't doing the little things that successful teams need to do: cutting the ring in half, utilizing quick tags, and executing double-team moves. On rare occasions when they do double-team an opponent, it's usually to deliver a pair of strikes from opposite sides (a chop block and clothesline, or an inverted atomic drop and a kick to the face). If they're going to remain a team, they should get back to wrestling like one. **GRADE: C**

**CAREER GROWTH:** We're not recommending Cade and Murdoch break up, but perhaps a trial separation is in order. They are growing complacent as a team, and neither man is living up to his individual potential. At times, they look like they are becoming lackadaisical, perhaps because they are so used to having their partner there to bail them out of trouble. That's never a good sign. Think about it: When you look at Cade, do you see a man who once was one of Shawn Michaels' prized students? We don't either. **GRADE: D**

**OVERALL VALUE:** There seems to be little commitment to the art of tag team wrestling in any WWE brand today. If Cade and Murdoch could get their game back in gear, they might be able to spark some renewed interest in the division. Unfortunately, they are struggling badly these days. They are too talented to allow themselves to become an afterthought. **GRADE: C-**



Photo by George Napolitano





Photo by George Napolitano



# KANE

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** The "Big Red Machine" came very close to winning his long-awaited second world title last summer when he ruined Edge's Mardi Gras celebration prior to the Great American Bash. It was a memorable moment and Kane seemed to have momentum on his side going into his Smackdown World title match scheduled for the Bash. However, Kane's attack backfired. Edge was injured and had to surrender the title, which was won by The Great Khali in a battle royal. Kane wasn't quite able to throw Khali around like he did Edge, and Kane quickly fell out of the title picture. Subsequent losses to MVP, Mark

Henry, and Big Daddy V have pushed him to the bottom of the ladder of contention. **GRADE: C-**

**MARKETABILITY:** Kane did a serviceable job as the big, bald monster in *See No Evil*, but then again, he's always the big, bald monster. His entrances always get a good reaction, especially when he's coming out to destroy someone the fans hate. But once the bell rings, his appeal is gone. WWE Creative has tried to push Kane for years, but it never sticks. **GRADE: C+**

**REPERTOIRE:** Uppercut, kick to the face, diving clothesline, chokeslam. Repeat if necessary. **GRADE: D**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Kane is badly in need of repackaging. He's not just stale, he's stagnant. Compare him to The Undertaker: 'Taker has added triangle chokes, dragon sleepers, and the gogoplata to his game. He has changed his look and has taken sabbaticals so he returns rested, refreshed, and with clear goals in mind. Kane just plods on, doing the same thing he always does—winning mid-card matches and falling short in main events. Looking back at Kane's career is like watching *Groundhog Day* ... only without any humor. Well, except for when Kane freaked out whenever anyone said May 19. That was pretty funny. **GRADE: D**

**OVERALL VALUE:** Kane is a solid utility player. He's a big, strong guy with a very dramatic entrance. In hockey terms, he's the fourth-line winger who isn't afraid to go to the net. Every once in a while, a puck might bounce off him and find its way into the net. He's not a liability to have around, so the fact that he doesn't actually do much other than show up doesn't really bother anybody. Kane is probably shuttled among the three WWE brands more than anyone else because he's good for a short-term spike. He can stir things up in ECW, bounce over to Raw for a big match, and then beat someone up on Smackdown. He fills a role and can perform at the main-event level. That versatility makes him a matchmaker's dream. But in the big picture, Kane doesn't add much. He needs an image consultant. **GRADE: D+**



Photo by George Napoitano





John Giamundo/WWE/Courtesy of CW Network



# CARLITO

**GOAL ACHIEVEMENT:** According to various reports, Carlito had been so frustrated with his position in WWE that he was ready to walk out on the company and either jump to TNA or head back home to Puerto Rico. Cooler heads prevailed and Carlito is still part of the Raw roster, but we wonder if he really made the right decision. Many industry analysts predicted that the second-generation Puerto Rican sensation would become as big a star as Randy Orton or The Rock. When he beat John Cena for the U.S. title in his first televised WWE match, and later won the Intercontinental title in his first match on the Raw brand, it looked as if Carlito was on his way to achieving those goals. Instead, he's completely fallen off the radar. He has slipped out of singles contention entirely and he and Santino Marella have yet to mount a serious challenge for the tag title. Worse, we can't remem-

ber the last memorable match Carlito has had. He may not be happy with his spot on the card, but he doesn't seem to want to do a thing to improve. **GRADE: F**

**MARKETABILITY:** Carlito's cool swagger and strong fan support from Puerto Rico should have made him an instant sensation. It didn't happen. Of course, the most interesting thing he does is walk around and spit apples at people, which is awfully hard to market (though WWE has certainly tried). Considering his father is the most popular wrestler in Puerto Rico's wrestling history and Carlito is a handsome, athletic guy, he should have a much more marketable image. **GRADE: D**

**REPERTOIRE:** Every once in a while, Carlito will show some moments of razzle-dazzle, such as when he springboards out of the corner with a twisting senton or back elbow. Occasionally, he'll even hit a beautifully executed moonsault. But his flashes of brilliance are inconsistent. Now that Chris Jericho has co-opted a version of Carlito's backstabber and dubbed it the codebreaker, Carlito needs to come up with something new to make himself stand out. **GRADE: C**

**CAREER GROWTH:** Carlito's WWE career is running on fumes. He needs to take a drastic step and break out of his funk. The obvious choice would be to orchestrate a breakup with Marella, but that alone won't substantially raise his profile. A jump back to Smackdown and a feud with Edge might serve him well if he can pull it off. In any case, he needs to revamp his image, unveil some new moves, and get back to being the guy who would interrupt other people's promos and simply take what he wanted. There's nothing worse than a rebel too lazy to rebel. **GRADE: D**

**OVERALL VALUE:** This isn't meant to be a knock on Carlito's talent. It's meant to be a kick in the rump so he can get his career back on track. Right now, Carlito is an afterthought. His biggest accomplishment of the first quarter of 2008 was beating up a seagull in a WrestleMania commercial. He's got to pull things together quick. **GRADE: D**

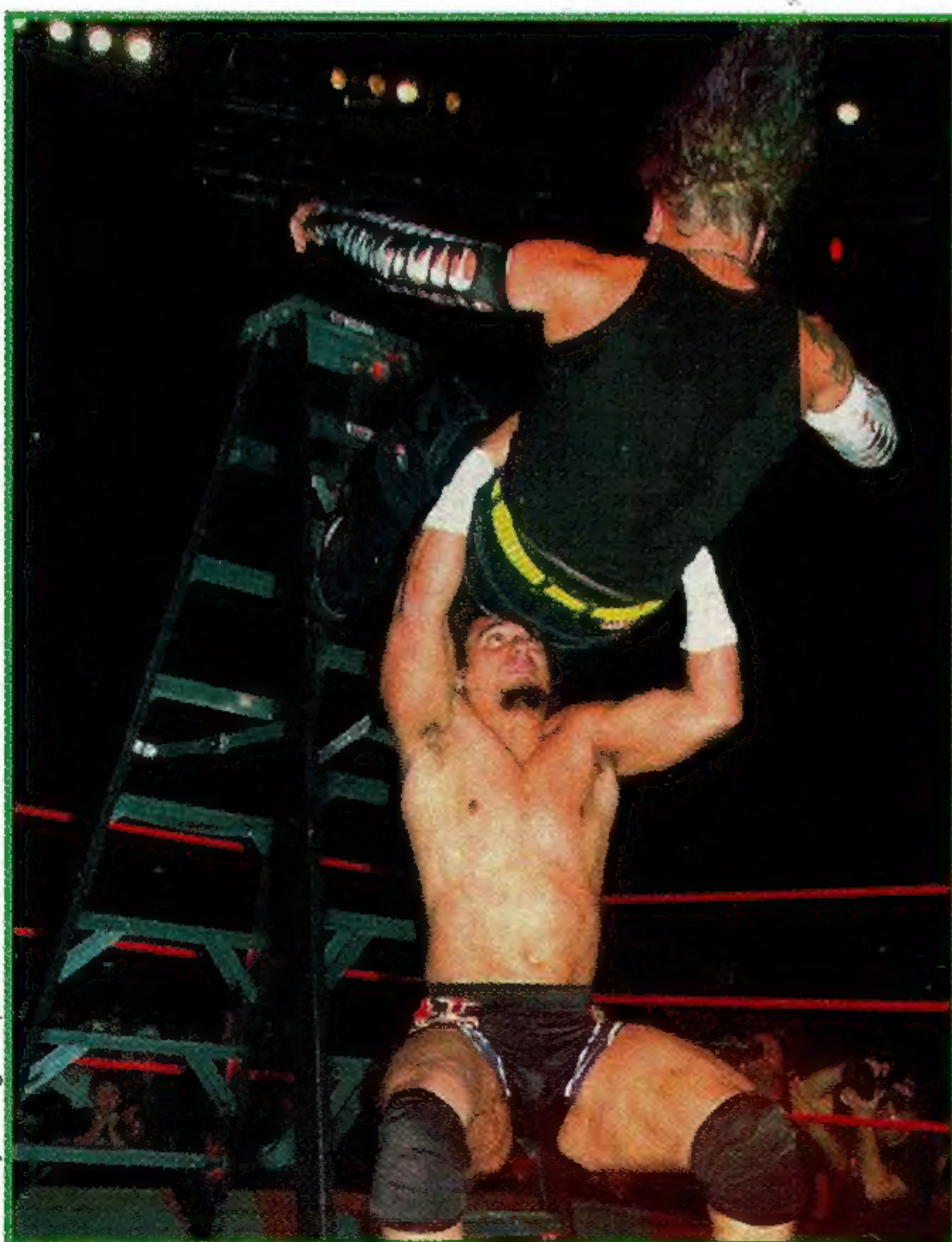


Photo by George Napolitano



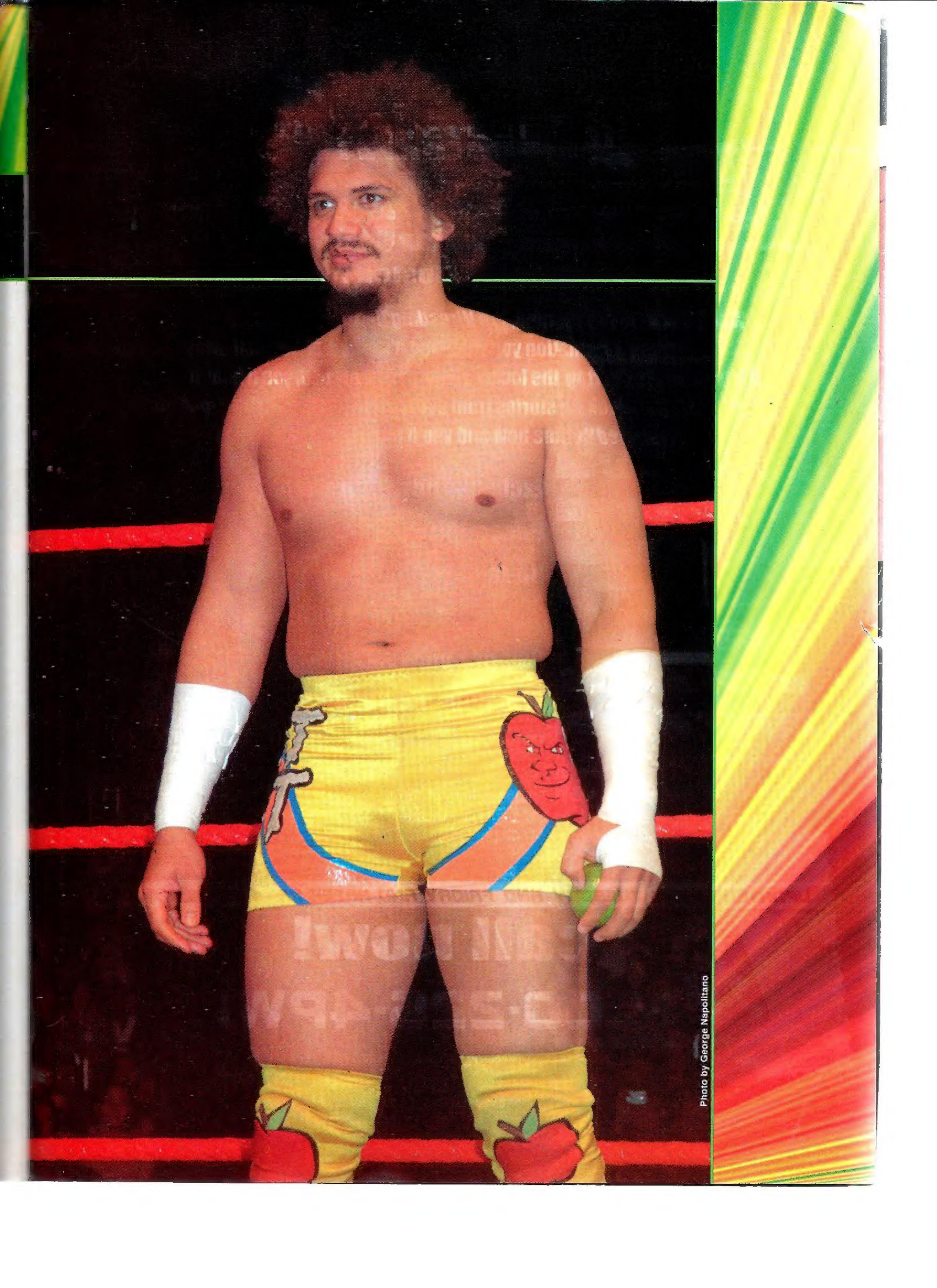
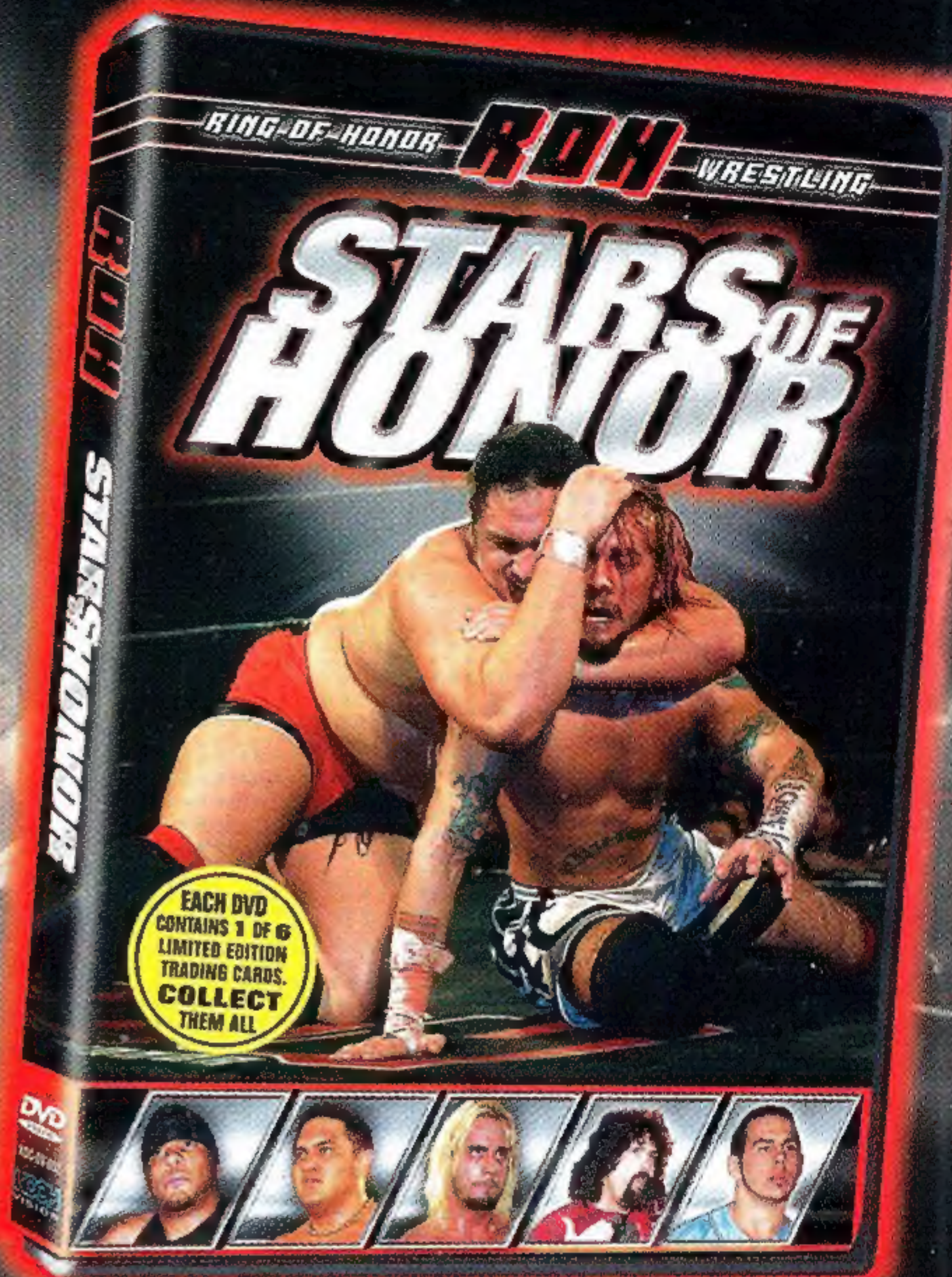
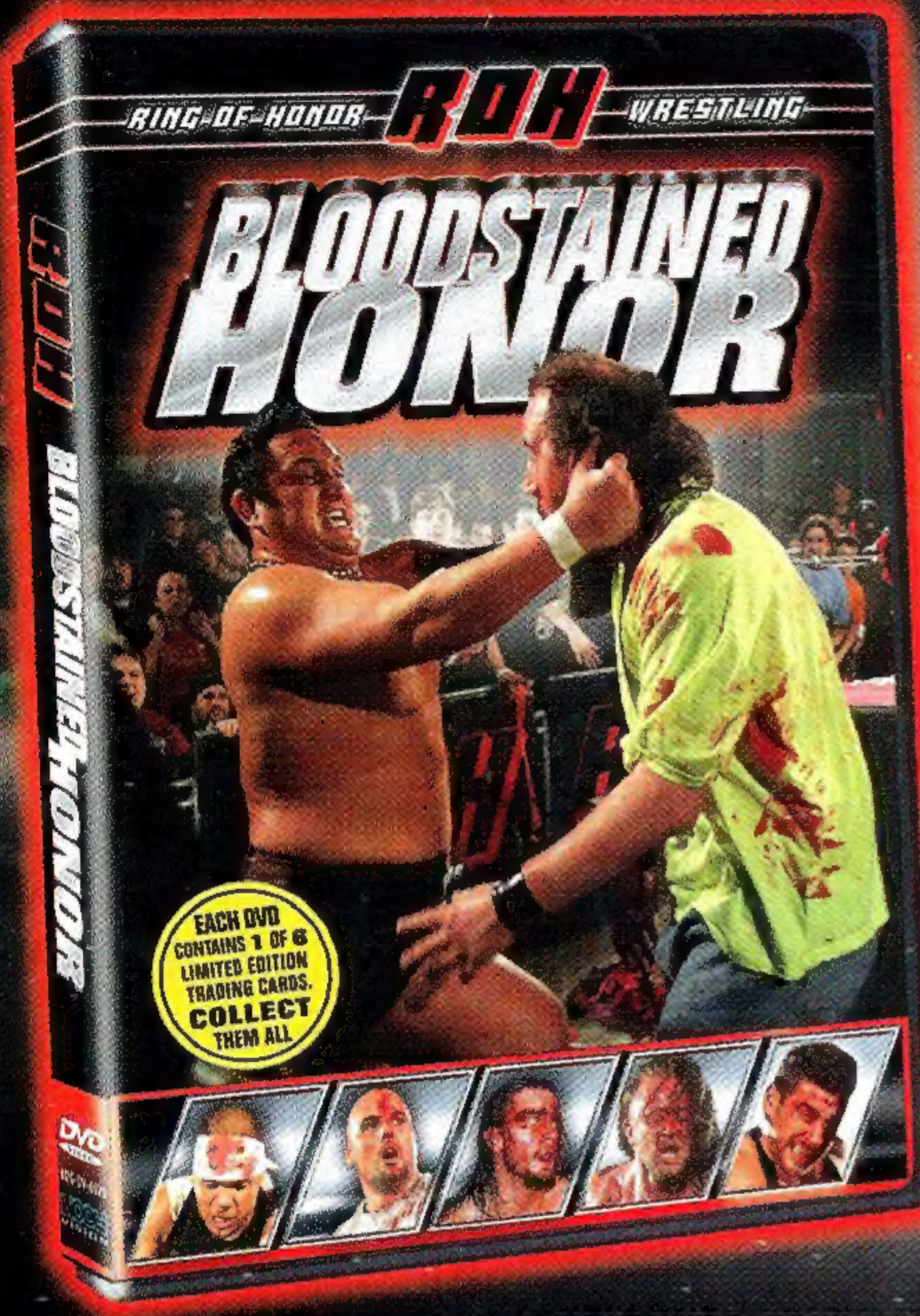


Photo by George Napolitano



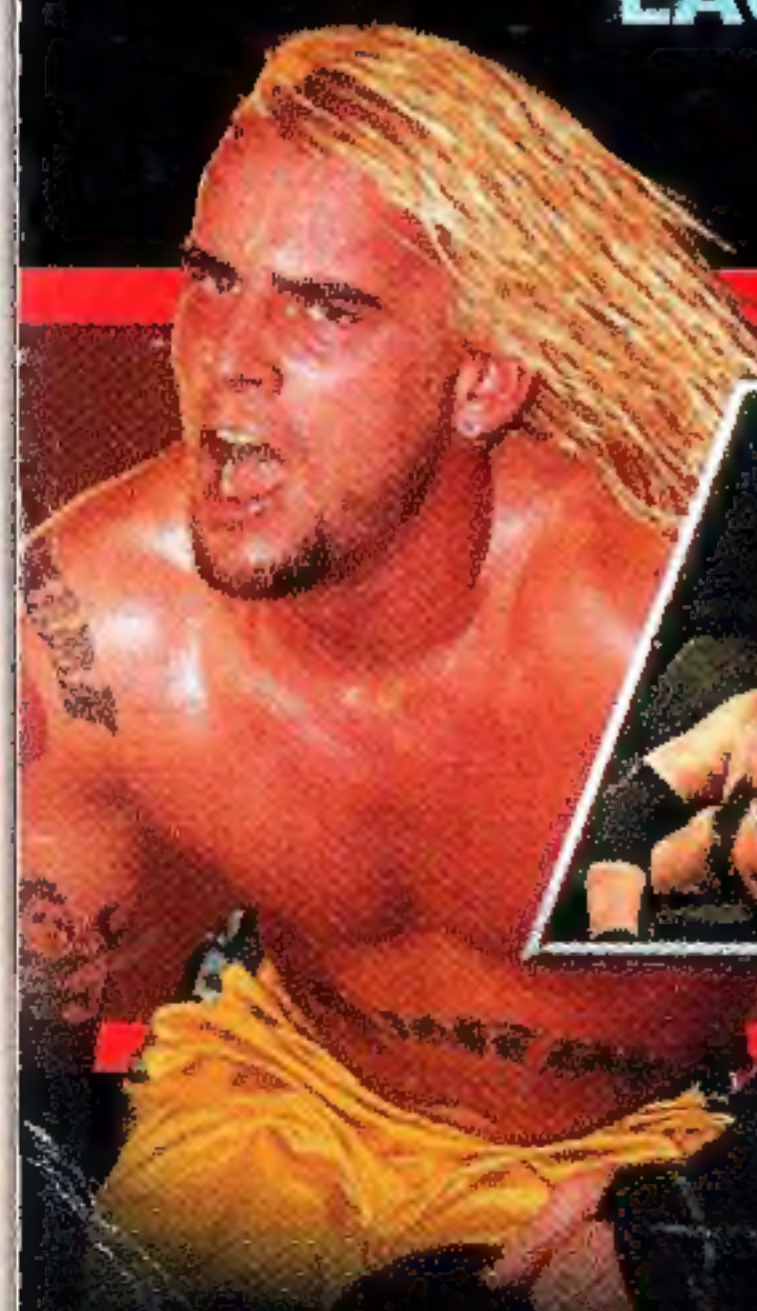
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